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Indian Literature
Vol. 51 2007 No. 4-6

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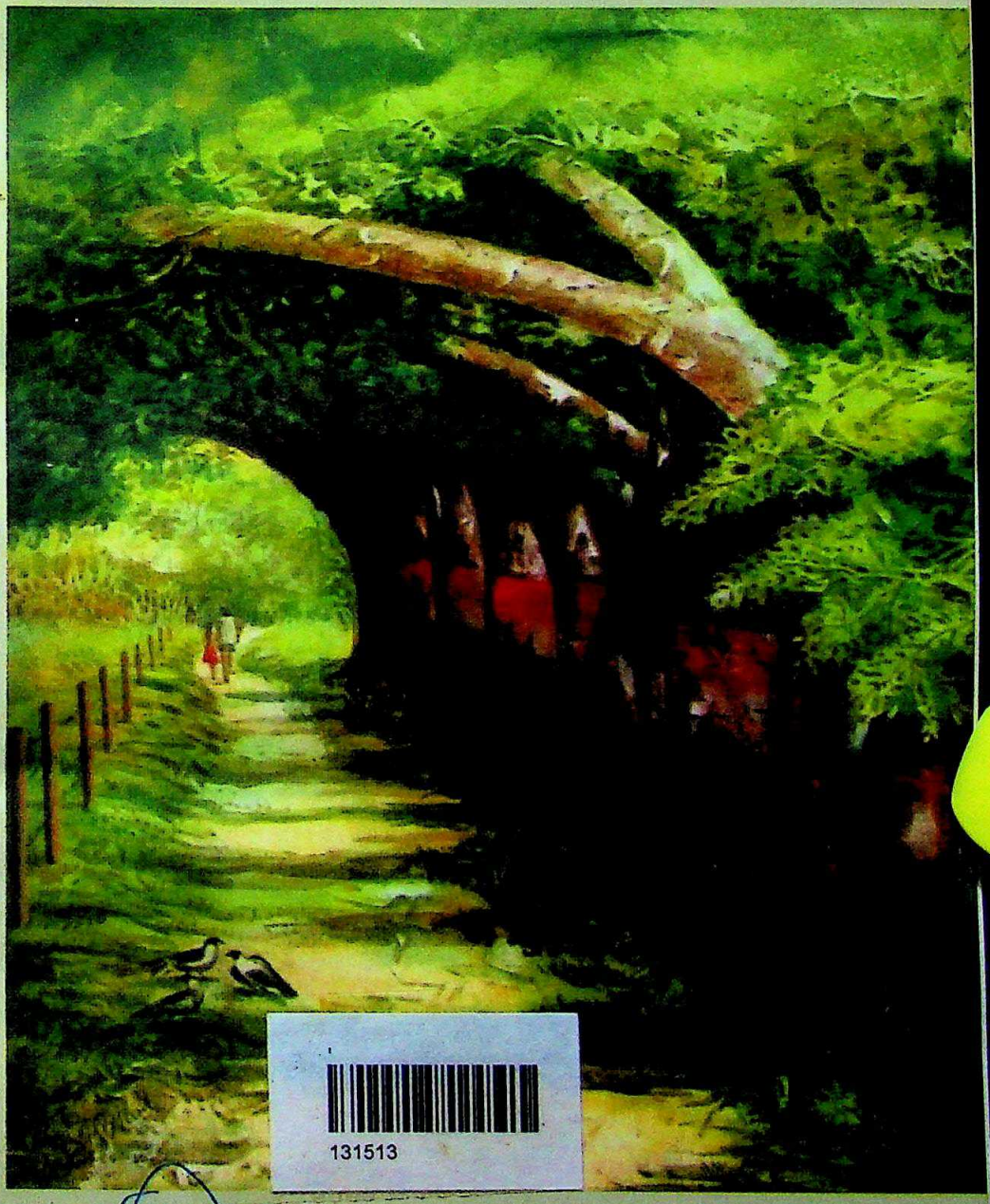
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Interview: Sudhanshu Chaturvedi

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Literary Criticism: Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers*

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July-August 2007
Vol. LI No.4

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Indian Literature

SAHITYA AKADEMI'S BI-MONTHLY JOURNAL

No. 240 : July-August 2007
Vol. LI No.4

Editorial Office:
Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan,
35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110001.

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In India inclusive of mailing: single copy, fifty rupees; one year (six issues) two hundred and fifty rupees; three years (eighteen issues), six hundred and fifty rupees. *Abroad by airmail:* single copy, fifteen US dollars; one year (six issues) seventy five US dollars; three years (eighteen issues) two hundred US dollars.

Published by Agrahara Krishna Murthy, Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110001, India.
and printed by him at Wellwish Printers,
P/P-5 Maurya Enclave, Delhi-110088.

Cover Paintings : Front Cover: Biraj Kr. Paul,
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SAHITYA AKADEMI'S BI-MONTHLY JOURNAL

241

Sept-Oct 2007
Vol. LI No.5

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Indian Literature

SAHITYA AKADEMI'S BI-MONTHLY JOURNAL

No. 241 : September-October 2007
Vol. LI No.5

Editorial Office:
Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan,
35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110001.

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Published by Agrahara Krishna Murthy, Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110001, India. and printed by him at Wellwish Printers, P/P-5 Maurya Enclave, Delhi-110088.

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POETRY

Rana Nayar (First)
Chinmoy K. Bose (Second)
Tapan Kumar Pradhan (Third)

Consolation Prize

Paromita Das
B.S. Rajkumar
Kuldip Salil
Anupam Bhattacharjee
K. Damodar Rao

SHORT STORY/FICTION

Subrata Banerjee (First)
Shoma A. Chatterjee (Second)
Abha Sah (Third)

Consolation Prize

Somdatta Mandal
Ravi Baswani
Parthasarathi Chakrabarti
Vimala Balakrishnan
Rani Motwani

ORAL LITERATURE

Subrata Basu (First)
Nila Shah (Second)
Shweta Rao (Third)

Consolation Prize

A.K. Srivastava
Joysree Das
Shyamal Chakrabarti
V. Ayothi
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Indian Literature

SAHITYA AKADEMI'S BI-MONTHLY JOURNAL

242

Nov-Dec 2007
Vol. LI No.6

Central Library
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Indian Literature

SAHITYA AKADEMI'S BI-MONTHLY JOURNAL

No. 242 : November-December 2007
Vol. LI No.6

Editorial Office :
Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan,
35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110001.

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Published by Agrahara Krishna Murthy, Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110001, India. and printed by him at Wellwish Printers, P/P-5 Maurya Enclave, Delhi-110088.

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With the present issue, *Indian Literature* completes fifty years of its publication. It was in October 1957 that the first issue of the then half-yearly journal came out. During these fifty years, *Indian Literature* has witnessed major literary trends that held sway in the regional language literatures and Indian English—broadly, it has borne the imprint of their evolution into modernist and post-modernist phases. The works of thousands of Indian writers including those of all-time greats have appeared in its pages. It has carried works expressing the surge of nationalism, freedom, and coming of age of Indian democracy and polity. It is with a great sense of pride and fulfillment that we at *Indian Literature* greet you, dear readers, on this historic occasion, which occurs but once in the lives of most of us who are associated with this journal now, as readers, writers or as its staff. As part of its golden jubilee celebrations, a translation competition has been announced in the genres of poetry, fiction and oral literature from all Indian language literatures into English. Advertisements in this regard have appeared in leading national dailies covering all regions of the country. The prize-winning entries and the runners up will be published in the forthcoming issues of *Indian Literature* on a priority basis.

It will be stating the obvious when I say that *Indian Literature* owes its very existence to translation. Indeed, a major part of Sahitya Akademi's mission is all about translation. Sahitya Akademi, from its very inception, has almost single-handedly managed English translation of great literary works from different languages of India until about a couple of decades ago, during a time when big-time publishers would not touch translation with a bargepole—of course, with the exception of literary editors like Mini Krishnan, pioneering lone crusaders who managed to convince their company top brass to adopt translation projects. Gradually, publishing houses run by voluntary organizations began to show interest in translation; soon, multinationals picked it up and now it has become quite fashionable, nay, it is in high demand. Indian Literature in English Translation has now grown into a distinct body of literature which has begun to be prescribed in the syllabi of graduate and post-graduate English programmes in several prestigious universities across the country. And, Sahitya Akademi still remains the biggest publisher and promoter of translated literary works.

A.J. Thomas / 5

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Apart from the massive reception through translation from the modern classics of English and major European languages, most of the Indian regional languages had gained from the fruits of the great Bengal renaissance too. It is well-known that the early development of these literatures in the modern phase, mainly in the genre of fiction, owes also a great deal to the translations of the works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyaya and others, and later, to those of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyaya, Manik Bandyopadhyaya and others, and of course, to the works of Rabindranath Tagore spanning the entire twentieth century and up to the present. Translations among other major Indian languages followed suit—amongst the various languages in the different regions, and between next-door neighbours. Also, between far-flung neighbours, for example, between Marathi and Bengali, Malayalam and Oriya etc. A major part of these activities during the last half-century had taken place under the auspices of the Sahitya Akademi, since books that win Akademi awards in a particular language are entitled to be translated and published in all other Indian languages, through the Akademi. Knitting together a pan-Indian literary and cultural sensibility was silently taking place thus, over the years.

It is quite natural then for the Akademi to celebrate translation annually. Come August, it is the translation festival season in the Akademi. For the last few years, this festival has been taken out of Delhi, as part of spreading out important activities of the Akademi to other parts of the country. This year, the Translation Prize and Bhasha Samman presentation ceremony has been held in Hyderabad. It is doubtful whether another festival of such magnitude, involving 24 major languages and several minority languages of India, is organized by any other literary agency in the country.

While talking about translation, Sudhanshu Chaturvedi, a unique personality in establishing linkages between the north and the south through translation both ways—from Malayalam to Hindi and Hindi to Malayalam—comes in. In an interview with the Akademi's Deputy Secretary, Brajendra Tripathi, excerpts of which we publish in this issue, Sudhanshu Chaturvedi describes how he became the ambassador of Hindi in Kerala and, in the process, became the pride of Malayalam, acquiring, as he says, the sobriquet *Malayalattinte maanasaputran* (which, in a loose translation, means 'the fond son of Malayalam's sensibility'), by translating modern classics like Kumaran Asan's *Chintaavishtayaaya Sita* (Sita Lost in Mournful Thoughts), and novels of P. Kesava Dev and others into Hindi, classical Sanskrit works of Bhasa and Kalidasa and major Hindi works into Malayalam and by writing original works in that language. One has heard of Joseph

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Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Josip Brodsky and others writing in English and gaining acclaim, much more than for their writings in their mother tongues, or Samuel Beckett, an Irish writer, getting the Nobel Prize for his works in French...or, of our own bilingual writers like Arun Kolatkar of English/Marathi and Kamala Das/Madhavikkutty of English/Malayalam, getting prestigious awards for their writings in English and their respective mother tongues. Though not so much acclaimed, Sudhanshu Chaturvedi learned Malayalam, wrote a book in that language and won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for it! Interesting bridge-building between the north and the south, between Hindi and Malayalam, indeed!

K.Ayyappa Paniker was a path-breaking poet, critic, a patron of translation and an internationally known scholar, academic and educator, who is hailed as the father of modernist Malayalam poetry. The books he edited for Sahitya Akademi *Medieval Indian Literature* (in 4 vols.), *Making of Indian Literature* (now released in an impressive revised edition), *Indian English Literature Since Independence* and *Modern Indian Poetry in English* are monuments to his memory. His first death anniversary falls on 23 August. *Samyuktha*, an eminent journal of women's studies published from Thiruvananthapuram, commemorates it in a special way—carrying reminiscences and assessments of him by peers, admirers and students, as well as his own works in translation. The "Select Bibliography" of his primary works appended at the end is in fact the most comprehensive I have ever come across. I wish to draw the kind attention of all our readers to this special number of *Samyuktha*. Another noteworthy event in memory of Ayyappa Paniker was the three-day World Poets' Meet, organised by Krutya Foundation at Kumaran Asan National Cultural Institute, Thiruvananthapuram. This Meet was special in that fifty poets from different parts of the country and the world—from Belgium, Austria, Hong Kong, Korea, Ireland, Croatia, Italy, Germany and many others—participated in the event at their own expense and exchanged views on current poetic expressions in their cultures. Perpetuating Paniker's memory, The Ayyappa Paniker Foundation has also been formed.

Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers* is the first novel I ever read—in Malayalam translation, at around the age of ten or eleven. Even now I remember the rivalry between the characters Nazu Mia and Azhgar Mia and the recurring theme of the fight against elemental fury that marks the narrative. Although I had read *The King of the Golden River*, *Gulistan* etc., also in Malayalam translation, soon after, but I do not remember anything about them beyond the titles. When I saw an essay which analysed this novel, I somehow had a kind of precognition about 'beginnings'. Hence, this essay has become part of our "Literary Criticism" section.

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What is wonderful about our folk traditions is that almost all of them have their own versions of the epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. We carry an essay identifying the 'Ramain' in its several folk versions in the myriad valleys of Himachal Pradesh.

The bhakti tradition has acted as the connector between the classical tradition and the folk tradition. The essence of the great epics and spiritual universals were presented before the common folks through the crystal-clear creations of our incomparable devotional poets, who, in the process, pioneered the evolution of whole new literatures. Usually, bhakti takes on the tone of sweet importunity, unbearable pangs of pain at separation and a beloved's pranks or love-quarrels. But Karaikkal Ammaiyar's *Ten Verses on Tiruvaalangad*, translated from classical Tamil by H.S.Shiva Prakash, presents a different form of bhakti—that of the macabre, the fierce—through which Lord Shiva is approached. The article by the translator throws light on the life of the poet and the *Verses*.

Read on....



A.J. Thomas
Editor

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Anjali Kulkarni

Reality

Every morning
I lock the door
and come out of this house
with thorough makeup,
perfumes sprayed upon
my neat, decent dress.

The locked door
stares at my smart countenance—
minutes ago
it had experienced
along with me
terrible despair
fits of anger and anguish
violent rays and lots more.

I entrust all these feelings
in the safe custody of the locked door
and go out on work
with pseudo-confindence
wearing an outlook
of fake pleasantries.

Like a streched spring
I remain humble
and behave nicely
to every one around.

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By the evening
I am exhausted
with the game of niceties
I come home drudged and tired.

The door is awaiting my comeback
It hands over back to me
All my sorrows and solace.

Behind the door
I once again
live real life
without any makeup.....

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke

Come on Comrade!

Like a fierce he-cat
eats its own progeny
The revolution has devoured
its legendary outcome
Comrade, your Communism
has been burried alongwith
your beautiful dreams
you are still caressing
the dead body of the revolution.

It's a time-tested truth
the change is inevitable
It's fracturous to spread arms
around a carcass

Why don't you accept the fact?
This corpse does not contain
you, neither your revolution
or your dreams?

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At least now,
come out of this dead-end
Breath freedom
behold the blue sky
stretched all around you....

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke

City

How crazily crowded is this city
the evenings illuminated
with intoxicating comforts
the wealth is over-flowing
through the wide streets
wasted eatables, oxyrich water bottles,
Traffic jams, the smoke
excreted by four wheelers
through the deafening noise
of a buzz of activities

The city is dancing
with fits of vigour
Right now it's so tired
like a child playing crazily
throughout the day

I feel like embracing this child
I feel like singing a lullaby to it
and create solace for it

Will my lullaby reach the
deaf ears of this crowded city?

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke

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Fatima

When fatima received
a kick on her stomach
and her mother tried to intervene
her husband uttered adamantly
'I'll thrash her
after all she is my wife...'
on the verge of unconsciousness
a panorama appeared
from her deep memories....
The scene of the honeymoon night
while enfolding her in an embrace
the husband had whispered–
"You are my life, darling"

It was a long journey
from being his 'life'
and now only wife.

The pains in her stomach
grew intense
while collapsing in the deep
valley of unconsciousness
the utter darkness was
wailing in her ears
Alas Fatima!

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke

Toy of Words

How meagrely we express
through the moments of life
hence this toy of words!
Sometimes you just look at it, amazed
sometimes catch hold of it
with child-like anxiety.

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You can break this toy
look at every part of it
you can touch it with eyes closed
you can just put it in mouth
and taste it.

There are many ways
of knowing this toy
many, many ways indeed
to understand it.

You can't really know
the whole of it
It's like a mirage
in a desert.
The more you know
about the toy of words
the more difficult it becomes
to capture it in words

Translated from Marathi by Narendra Bodke

❑

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Anvar Ali

Don't be Angry

Don't be angry.

Last night
I gave a kiss to the love of ours
that we buried
before it budded into a boy or a girl,
in between two trace-lines
closer to the life-line
in the middle of your left palm

You didn't know that

It asked: 'For what?
For bringing me up privileged in past life?
Or to be orphaned in streets in the next?'

"No": I replied.
"You are a pain
that befell me
and her who wasn't fated to bear you

for tearing away from each other
and going to get dried up
on the clotheslines of different homes

that evening
when rain soaked this life,
just before twilight suspended
the forlorn trees

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upside down from the earth to the nether-world,
with just the rumble of a *Lambretta*
that passed us by,
our sole witness"

It smiled
got up
and came with me
wearing the kiss I gave

Don't be angry
avenge me tonight
unbeknown to me.

Translated from Malayalam by Bindu Krishnan

The Night I Read Tsvetaeva

(To your sojourn and to our poetry nights on the banks of River Nila)

The room upstairs
and the moon at the window;
we are reading
Marina Tsvetaeva

Can you hear?

I've adjusted
the dwarf moon
towards your window
that lags behind several hours

Now,
O, prism,
can you hear
the broken image
the moonlight paints?

Marina Tsvetaeva: Russian poet; hanged herself in 1941

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Though thrown and shattered

Verse of hers
in my throat
slim as the waning *Nila*:
'We have grown into one'*

Can you see?

Translated from Malayalam by T.P Rajeevan

A Yaksha in Aryavarta[1]

Has *Umma*[2] called
scooping up light
and splattering it on the rolling bit of cloud?

"Hey, don't you have to catch *Venaad*[3]
get up, quick!"

Springing awake, drizzling at her the blame
"Oh, it's late, and yet
you didn't call me earlier,"
it's *galis*[4] in front, like smoke rising from
the *chulas*[5] whom fire gnaws at;
'Ram, Ram', the desert winds...
what a dream, this abode!

Stretched the limbs on the balcony
like a midrib on a palm-frond, for a moment, then ceased;
the ill-omens emerged: *Venaad* may now be
rowing across the Perumon[6] bridge.
The sun, the wheezing old man, donning a white dhoti,
may be rising at the end of
our *Aamayizhanchaan*[7] Canal;
who knows for sure?

---

* 'We have grown into one' – A line from Tsvetaeva's 'Poem of The End', a love poem with seven parts which contextualise the moment that two lovers separate for ever.

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Who knows why
the winds shut these dense clouds
in midnight's cellar and made off?
Is it to soak the meat of dawn
the sun has cut, out of time?
Is it to wash away
the revolting red dewlaps, throats
in the pitch-black Yamuna[8]?
Is it to irrigate
their ploughed up screams,
the shadow-fields?

'Who should know?'
The broom spread its thousand tips of heat;
a drop of star, hit by those obscenities,
shuddered and dropped down;
the poor thing had slept on
almost out of depths...!
Her wetness over my forehead,
the coolness, the warm breath;
eyelids closed....

Sunshine clothes are brushing...
Is there a heavy rush in the train?
Has it passed Tiruvalla station?
Are we nearing Kottayam[9] ?

"*Aao, aao, paani tanki aagayii*,"[10]
someone howled in Hindi.
Are they the fear-civet-trains that lie waiting
at the contra-track like grand *Nagari*[11] scripts?
No, those are the rented tongues of the rootless,
gaavs[12], powder magazines that rose
mating in sticky blood surges...
the open wounds, doors that the dreadlocks, cables,
sew up; the netherworlds of mob that ooze from them—

Bodies on which the half-saris of sweat burn,
tender ones that scatter like water-sparks
the last blazing of oldies, heaving futile sighs
flies of lust rising, churning up pyres

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claws of thirst, fever of love,
bullocks roaming around *dhabas*[13] returning,
cow-beauties throwing eye magic at them,
calves slipping on their dung-sandals
dogs sleeping at their boundaries, doves
plucking the street's grey hairs;
at a distance a flock of sparrows
shaking the thicket of rust, shrieking
'drinking water...'

Has the rain ceased?
How hot, smelly this day-meat!
Is the train held up at Vaikom Road?
Is it the shouting of a newspaper boy,
'The Sea of *Karkkidakam,*'[14] or the roar of a wind?
Is it by swimming across the backwaters
that the wind approaches?
No, it's coming drilling this cooler.

Sat simply, leaning against the wall,
driving out the grimness of draught.
Behind the tower of corpses,
the sun grimaced and blazed.
This is a voyage across
the waters of a mirage.
Consciousness,
mind's meat
its moisture dried up.
The chest is summer,
the firewood, self-pride
the invasion of sandstorms
the migration of the benumbed....
Umma maybe wet, weeping, and laughing;
the *Aamayizhanchaan* Canal maybe
overflowing, spreading around.

The monsoon rain-train
is descending beyond Piravom Road
Innumerable furrows, swamps, islands
Watery terrains, their nerves...

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nerves are multiplying in the incessant flow
The flocks of nomadic clouds are
being herded with the whiplash-lightning
by the winds mounted on the Western Ghats
Wavelets cut through with the Axe[15]
are beckoning
The Ocean of Tunchat chants a hymn,
inviting to dive deep into the Fishy depths[16]
The well of Poontaanam, to draw the pure waters
to make the *Ajnaanappaana*[17] full till it brims over
The Kunchan rivers dancing *Tullals*,[18]
are inviting, to plough up the five *tinas*...[19]

"It's Shoranur. Get down, quick."
Did *Umma* call, shaking my dream?
No, it's a tender throat,
"*Tanki jaa rahi saab*![20]"
In the open mouth, a star-drop
the poison *Kaakolam*[21]
'*Paani naa lena, kya*'? [22]

Translated from Malayalam by A.J.Thomas *and the* Poet

Translators' Note

This poem is written with direct reference to *Meghadootam* of Kalidasa. The tradition of *Sandesha kavya* or a message-poem, in which a forlorn lover sends his love-message to his lady-love through some non-human agent like a cloud, a peacock, etc., in Indian literatures, began with this poem, in which a Yaksha or a demi-god, whom his lord and employer, Kubera, the God of Wealth, banished from his court, because he didn't pay enough attention to his duties, as he was newly-married and was day-dreaming about the happiness he enjoyed in the company of his wife, the Yakshi. He was banished to Ramagiri, outside Aryavarta, or the region where Aryas spread upon migration to India. The protagonist of the present poem is however banished into Aryavarta (to Delhi)—it is banishment nevertheless, as he has parted from his beloved people and milieu. The poem is conceived, as the protagonist wakes up from his night's sleep on the open balcony of a small house in an 'urban' village of Delhi, with its sights and sounds, smells and ambience....

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Notes

1 *Aryavarta*, generally North India, now here meant to be Delhi.

2 *Umma*, is 'Mother', the kinship term generally used in the Muslim community.

3 *Venaad* is an Express day-train that begins from Trivandrum, the capital city of Kerala, and terminates at Shoranur, a northern town.

4 *Gali is* a common word used in North India for narrow street or lane between two rows of houses or buildings in an urban village, or an ancient part of the city.

5 *Chula* is the indigenous oven on which the poor boil their morning tea and cook their humble meals.

6 *Perumon Bridge* is a railway bridge across the arm of the Asthamudi Lake in south Kerala, notorious because of one of the worst train accidents in the history of Indian Railways.

7 *Amayizhanchan Canal* is a canal in Trivandrum, near the residence of the poet.

8 *Yamuna* is the river with dark waters (indicating depth) celebrated in the Krishna story. During Krishna's childhood, this river was polluted by the poison of a mythical serpent, Kaliya, which affected the people, cattle and even vegetation— a grim prophecy of what was to come in the present times in the form of environmental pollution. Yamuna that flows through Delhi remains one of the most polluted rivers in the world, its waters pitch black, in spite of the many 'Save Yamuna' campaigns.

9 *Tiruvalla, Kottayam, Piravom Road, Vaikom Road* etc., are railways stations that the *Venaad Express* passes through

10 *Aao, aao paani tanki aa gayi"* in Hindi means, "come, come, the water tanker has arrived..."

11 *Nagari* script or the Devanagari script is the one used by many a north Indian languages. Originally used to write the Sanskrit language, this script is an ancient one, which has been famously described by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as resembling clothes hung from a clothesline to dry. It also resembles a train made up of inter-linked oblongs of bogies.

12 *gaav*: literally means a village; here, it is an urban village of Delhi.

13 *Dhaba* is a traditional restaurant with an open kitchen, meant for the common people, found in cities, towns and villages alike, particularly in the Indo-Gangetic plains.

14 *Karkkidakam* is the monsoon month that corresponds to the month of *Ashadha*, the time of action of *Meghadootam*..

15 The Axe which cuts the Wavelets— is a direct reference to the legend of Parasuraman creating Kerala, by hurling his battle-axe from Gokarnam in the north to Kanyakumari in the south. The land between these two points is believed to have emerged from the sea, forming Kerala. The reference to 'Wavelets' reminds one of the wave-like metre (*Tarangini*), using which the Niranam poets of the Kannassa family composed their *Ramayanam* and *Mahabharatam*, a good two centuries before Tunchat Ezhuttachan, the Father of Malayalam Poetry, composed his *Ramayanam* and *Mahabharatam Kilippaattu*, undoubtedly influenced by the existing models.

16. *The Ocean of Tunchat...Fishy depths*: Reference to the ocean-like poetic world

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of Tunchat Ezhuttachan and his *Bhaagavata* tradition (the Fishy depths referring to the first, and by implication, to the entire ten, Incarnations of Vishnu).

17 *The well of Poontaanam*...the *Ajnaanappaana*: Poontanam Namboodiri was the great poet after Ezhuttachan in the movement of Devotional Poetry. *Jnaanappaana,* his greatest work, as précise and full as a well, means the "Vessel of Wisdom"; *Ajnaanappaana* would mean the "Vessel empty of wisdom" that, when it is filled till it brims over, becomes *Jnaanappaana*

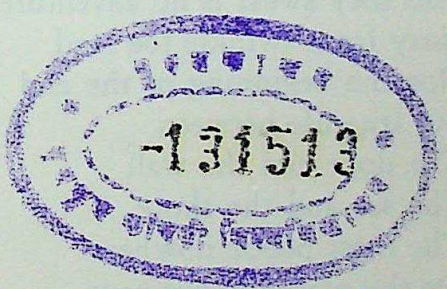
18 *Kunchan rivers...Tullals* : Kunchan Nambiar is a great Malayalam poet of the 18th century, who, through the satirical narration of the socio-cultural life of Kerala in his *Tullals* (a poetic as well as a performing form of art founded by him, as a pastiche of the ancient classical form, *Chaakyaar Koottu*,), ploughed up the social values of the time.

19 *The five tinas*: Reference to the poetic division of the ancient *Thamizhakam* (the ancient South Indian Civilization) into five regions according to the subject-matter of poetry that was adopted—*kurinchi* for hilly-forest regions, *mullai* for forests, *paalai* for wasteland, *marutam* for agricultural lands, and *neital* for seashore.

20 "*Tanki jaa rahi saab*", in Hindi means: "The water tanker has moved away, Sir!"

21 *Kaakolam*: According to Indian Mythology, *Kaakolam* is the poison that emerged along with Amrit (the sacred drink ambrosia that induced immortality) when Devas churned Paalazhi (the Ocean of Milk). Lord Siva, one of the trinity of Gods, drank the poison to save the universe and to enable the Deva community to enjoy Amrit.

22 "*Paani naa lena, kya?*" in Hindi means: "Don't you want to collect water?"



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Elzy Taramangalam

Impromptu Verse

Here's a 'story from Newfoundland
As I heard it from the herd
Once a girl met a boy
In heart's delight
They courted and married
In heart's desire
And went on to conception bay
For honeymoon, work and play
They lived happily ever after
At heart's content
This they swear is no adventure
Story from twinkle toe land
Nor the beginning of the end
But true life between
The door and the wall
The sea and the shore
The most poetic nowhere
On this grasping continent.

Oman

Just when living here
Was turning all debits
Switching from beggar
To muse she writes
Poem after poem
Like a call to prayer
Full of grace and praise

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Prowling out of a dark place
Not tamped and muted
But dancing in the rain of words
Climbing on the wings of wind

Move over Sindbad
This is Cinderella in Sohar
Reclaiming glories of a legend
Lost O-man!

Vow

Breaking the non-stop
Sameness of our life
Regularly I do
Become an imp
In an invented tale
The shared strangeness
Of other places
Their desperate distances
The divided intimacies
The descending silences
Make our portable world
Real, felt, desired, feared.
A wandering woman
To your fixed Rodin
Waltzing around you
I pledge I do.

Answer

Here is the truth
Lord of my heart
Some lie imaginatively
Some lie conveniently
Some do it for pleasure
Some to cause pain
Not wanting to tell you

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Something I'm exquisitely
Resolutely silent
Resorting to the Buddhist
Remembrance trick
The answer must exist
For, once we knew it.

Barrage

Elephant in the house
Rhubarb in the room
Chop off the root
And shear the head
Only the stalk is good.

Chose the object
For what it is not
As much as what it is
Wherever nature whispers
We bellow.

Whenever thieves neglect
To augment the theft
Charges should be laid
For lack of consternation
Compare what was and
What was not a captured miracle.

Now and Then

Maids will be burnt
Maids will be canonized
It's not love
It's not hate
It is worse.
In plain words
It's just reward
For free will

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In a world of blasted hopes
Afraid of subtleties.

Stripes and Splendour

The Indian squirrel
Is a regular rodent
A dull gray mammal
That got pretty lucky

By the stroke of a hand royal
Divine, Rama blessed
The worker in gratitude
Making toil worthy for eternity

It wasn't a question
Of being in the right
Place at the right time
Nor the outward appearance

But the sum total of experience
The splendour on the back
Three white stripes
The embers of grace aglow.

Artist's Eye Poet's Tongue

The more confusing the world
The more, sore searching they do
Waking up from practised procrastination
Dimly perceived capacities

Gathering up the pieces
Assets that have become liabilities
Mingling with bizarre compulsions
Body, flesh and fluid

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Mangling them like an assassin
A sweet kite on a killer string
A gauche gift for saying the wrong things
In epicene language, shot with deft punctuations

Never results in Rubik's-cube satisfaction
Of getting all the pieces to click together
In picture post-card perfection
The connections and the brokenness.

Summer Smarts

Put a spider and a pirate
In a gold fish bowl
Boy that is cool
Summer marvel
Unfolding with a twist and a roll

If it's a Chilean
Black widow then
Blessed strapping farmers
Turn perpetual lovers
Becoming heaven
In deathly hollows

Totally fatal
To the tottering elderly
Veering to implicit telegraph memories
Ready for other worlds
Praying for heaven languidly.

Transgressions

When you are dull and weary
What bliss it is to glide
Like a bit of dandelion fluff
From one neatly mowed
Monochromatic lawn to the next
In unarticulated joy

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Dispersing to smithereens on wind
Cheating dead ends
En masse to nature's sign
Heart overflowing mind propelled
To some enigmatic foreshadowing
Of complex volume and void
On a cosmic ride
Refusing to live small
In itemized purity
In an incendiary word-land.

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Farhat Nasreen

Déjà vu

Like water in clouds
Like colour in flowers
Like whiteness in milk
Like mysterious fragrance in wet mud
Like the magic in love
Her memories are intrinsic with the current

When multiple shades of the sky looked confusing
When roads seemed like measureless snakes
When synthetic masks appeared to be flesh and blood
When I lost way in the ebony woods called world
She held me with her luminous hands

An inexplicable sense of déjà vu envelops me, submerging me in itself
The past overtakes the present
And I can almost hear her calling me
Lost in a smoke that never clears
I keep walking through the mists of conscience
Stumbling over regrets
But cognate with a lover, blind to the beloved's erratum
I cherish her without any conditions
Her indelible impressions are the jewels of my treasure box

So what if she had to leave?
She has not left me alone
She still is the happiness in my laughter and tears in my eyes
As I smile over her thoughts, she relaxes in the cracks of my lips
Invisible and inaudible, she is all around me
Because love loves to defy death.

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The Little Soul

The dream that she never dreamt
The scene that she never saw
The song that she never sung
The life that she never lived
Her share was usurped, because she was a female

She screamed but there was no sound
She cried but there were no tears
She pleaded but no one listened
She died but no one cried
She was killed unborn, because she was a female

She had gifts to give but there were no takers
She had secrets to share but there were no listeners
She had ends to achieve but there were no allies
She had love to offer but no one cared
Family turned murderous, because she was a female

The journey from her mother's womb to the garbage dump was small
But the question that the little soul asked God was big
His equity, He had said was supreme
Was there no justice for her because she was a female?

Sounds of a Silent Gun

Sounds of a silent gun echo on
A toy held firmly in the hands of a frenzied woman
Pumping imaginary bullets in real people at a traffic signal

Some ladies point at her with their delicately manicured fingers
Others look through as if a strand of disarrayed hair matters more
Some men mock her
Laughter makes their eyes water
But these are tears of death;
Death of their sensitivity

It is a short encounter and the lights turn green
One army of colourful cars is replaced by another

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And the woman continues her play.
Whom does she want to kill?
Someone whose lust, greed for wealth or power minced her soul?
Or is she simply a divine joke?
But why is humanity making a mockery of itself?

Stars never die even in mid-noon
They only disappear to resurface in darkness
Let us break the barbarian handcuffs of bigotry
And free ourselves of arrogant indifference
Before we are slaughtered at the alter of the God of egotism
And sounds of the gun explode
To drown us in the red dye of blood
Let us stop, let us think, let us act....

Friends

Just yesterday they were playing together in the dust,
Their ears newly pierced, their hair as long as a pig's tail,
Tied with coloured ribbons,
Neighbours next door, friends of fame,
Their imagination flew like multicoloured kites in a cool airy sky,
Limitless like their games
Oh! Where had they learned such proficiency in affection?

Watching *Janmashtami Jhankis* together was fun,
Their eyes twinkled together on Deepawali nights,
Both wore new clothes on *Eid*, spent the day together.
They grew;
All colours around them changed,
But they played *Holi* in the same hue of love.
How much of faith did they not have?

Once their world was torn apart,
Split into two, swayed now by anger, now by greed.
When the holocaust ceased, crossing over dead bodies
Dodging death, their fathers came, but brothers didn't
Never.

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They cried dry
Tears fell even as they wiped them away,
Eyes restless, bodies flaccid;
As if someone had buried them very deep and still they were breathing;
Hearing echoes of screams they had heard,
Sizzling like a funeral pyre.

They lost treasures agglomerated over the years,
But does the loss needs to continue?
Can't frowns behind *burqas* and *bindis* be transmuted into smiles?
Which divinity enfranchises violence?
Yet such a waste of humanity?

The questions are threatening, but the answers lie within
Let us search them....

The Lost Poem

Life is a poem, she had once thought
She could write it the way she liked
Choose a word or drop it
Cut an odd line and recompose it
The pen was at her command and the theme at her disposal
After all it was her poem, it was her life

The first page was written beautifully
Her pencils sharp and colourful; illustrations were of parental love
Her pens filled with the ink of enthusiasm,
Spelling mistakes were erased and corrected with tender reprimand
She wrote with confidence and zeal

With the ending of one, a new page was turned
It was promised that she could continue writing
But the page was black, like ashes
A clean page could be bought, only on payment
How would her family pay, she wondered
She tried to write with white ink
Which was unlike the earlier hues she loved
As the ink ran out, her pen was snatched, broken and burnt

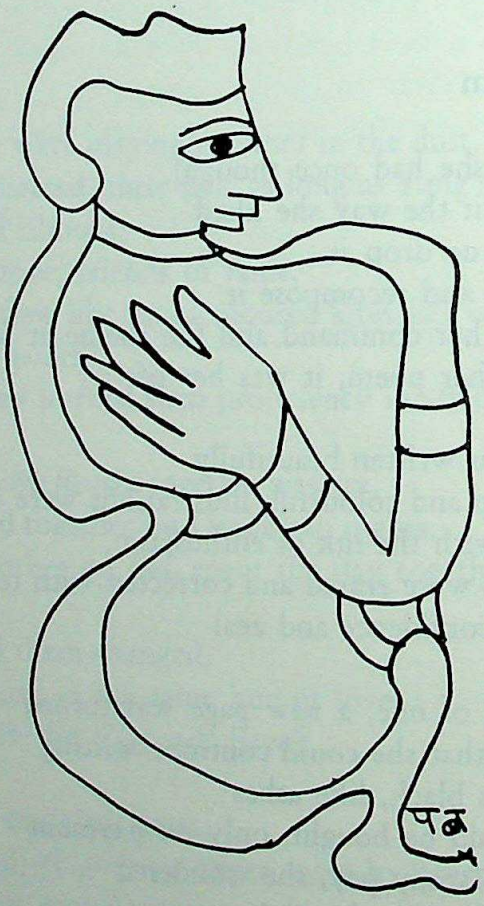
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The black page was blank
As she stood alone at the margins
She glanced at the refreshing lines she had written earlier
And decided that she could not leave this poem incomplete
She will not accept defeat, she will plunge into the sea of words and opportunities;

She will find a new page, a new pen, a new life....
After all it was her life, it was her poem....
And she was never going to lose it

❑



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Ghulam Nabi Khayal

The Poet and the Shama

Wrapped in night's shadowy veils,
The sun dropped behind that hill,
And the crimson glow of the evening sky
Began to fade away.

The trees stand numb;
The birds have now retired to their nests.
Solitude stretches itself; loneliness plumes its wings.

The solitary light burning on the top of Sulaiman Hill
Is like a will-o'-the-wisp lying in wait for wayfarers.
The mountains look like deserted, unshrouded corpses,

The moon like one in a swoon in a haze-covered starry sky
Silence has sealed all music,
And hushed lies every voice,
But for the owl's hoots that assail my ears from every side.
Time moves with tired feet;
Dusk has not changed to night,
And wild despair grips one's soul,
For dawn seems far away.

I give my life for you, O Shama, O lamp!
For having brought me light,
A balm for heart's sore wounds,
A hope that I will meet my Love.
Though burning is your destiny
For you chose it at your birth,
The moths that are dancing round your flame

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Will forsake you when it's out.
This is the way the world goes,
But it shouldn't warp your soul

Wind and storm seek your life
As the world's spears are aimed at mine.
Nemroud was destined to be the king,
Socrates to drink the poisoned cup,
Farhaad fruitlessly to dig a canal for milk to flow.

I've seen wine for the worthless flow,
True zeal rewarded with bitterness,
Flowers in the graveyard bloom
And hail destroys the bowers.

What lovely forms are dust,
How many houses desolate!
How many young men gathered
By the moral scythe of Time!
O how many are palanquin-borne only to desolation,
Bright Henna changed to dull mud on their hands!

My eyes have ached to see the stars,
I've paid for the dew with my tears,
My days are spent here
Plunging into deeps and shoals of thought.
But ever floats before my eyes
The face that shames the Kartik moon.

That body lovely like the mirror-clean stream,
That cypress stature which keeps alive my flame,
Those fawn's eyes at which I've drunk goblets of wine.

O what use it is to cry?
Dreams were strangled young!
The tulip nurses the wound in his heart:
He does it silently

O life, with your changing moods
Of the spring breeze,

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The impulsive beating of a rain-cooled heart
The grace of one's love!

You are also the poison-filled cup,
A corpse decaying on the road,
An evening in this jail

(This poem was composed in the Central Jail, Srinagar, where the poet was incarcerated for political dissent in 1958 for two years.)

Translated from Kashmiri by Trilokinath Raina

A Song in a Kashmir Village

You've stopped our meeting every morn and eve
At the Spring,
How hard, my love!

Why came you then at all
To feed the gossips with our tale?

You wore hyacinth print,
Your rosy hands were dyed in Henna paste
How vulnerable to the taunts the village elders hurled at you!

Your village cast a spell on me;
Though a townsman, I forget the town.

It was a tyrant love that drove me here,
A prey to common jibe.

Be wary of your jealous friends;
They'll sell our love to common tongues.
And tear to bits my clothes,
And they won't spare your skirt,
How hard!

I said, "Bewitching is the moon tomorrow,
Let's make love under the blossoming peach."

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You said, "What use I give at home, and come to the peach."
How hard?

Translated from Kashmiri by Jiya Lal Kaul

At the Frontier Post

This spot of earth was scorched by enemy fire
And sprinkled with the blood of man.
At this very spot at the frontier post,
Far, far away from home, my comrades dug a hole
And buried my bullet-ridden body:
The body of mine which in its lusty youth
Was caressed by my land of birth,
Nourished in every fibre for months and years,
By lakes and tarns and vigorous highland breeze,
Which saw its glorious sun-births and sunsets glow.

Should you, perchance, come to that dreary spot,
The shade of Shalimar Chinars will welcome you,
And you will feel rested as on Dal Lake shores.
The dust you tread upon will rose bloom,
You cannot step but on a flowerbed.

Here, resting awhile, a thought may tease your mind:
"War came here trailing destruction and death,
Drenching this spot with streams of blood,
Charging the air with gun powder and bombs,
How is it then the earth is green again,
And there is a stir of life around?
Birds fly up in the air,
The breeze blows fresh and cool."

Then standing up you cast a look around,
A tomb obscure will greet your eye,
And you will understand,
This dreary spot will for ever Kashmir be.

(This poem was inspired by Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier*)

Translated from Kashmiri by Jiya Lal Kaul

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Someone

I was the aroma
Of the spring breeze
How could I know?
Wherever I spread?

The whole night long
I searched for
The market place
And wilderness,
But on reaching home
In broad daylight
I lost my way.

He stole my heart
A long time back,
Ask not when?
Ask not who?

Should I convey him?
Through the winnowing wind
That he alone will suffer
Who is destined to suffer.

Tulips didn't bloom
On the rooftop of clay
Since someone
Occupied the house below.

O Khayal, you write
Verses sweet
Inasmuch as
You think of
someone.

A Guru you're guiding yourself
That too is Khayal, and no one else.

Translated from Kashmiri by Hameed Mumtaz

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The Prayer

It's the same pain, the same old affliction,
Time and again, our wounds were cut open.
So many incisions, so many times.
Don't we have any escape from anguish?

Time has changed its colours before our eyes.
We looked at it steadily and earnestly,
And lost our own eyesight.

The night, a night in a jungle,
Besieged in frightful mountains.
Don't we have to see the light?

This dry and dark deep well,
Where we reached today,
Shall turn deeper and black tomorrow.
This room where we sang songs of the sun,
It is now covered with the thick blanket of darkness.
This imprisoned night
How can we see the blonde hair of the beloved?
How can we find her even in her shadow?
Come, ye, my friends, illuminate the whole of it.
If you don't have lamps,
Why not to kindle your hearts?

Yesterday, when I accompanied you in broad daylight,
I came from closed room into openness,
Where I had spent every moment like a chained sick man.
I don't know where you led me to,
I recall that the soles of my feet fell on embers,
The birds had their thirsty beaks parched,
The air carried a stink of gunpowder.

I recall,
Where there was a dried up tree in wilderness,
Someone amongst us recited from Eliot:
"Here is no water but only rock,
Rock and no water and the sandy road,
The road widening above among the mountains,

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Which are mountains of rock without water,
If there were water we stop and drink,
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think,
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand,
If there were only water amongst the rock."[1]
I remember this much and nothing else.

My room is again guarded by the same darkness,
I must go to sleep now.
I was reading the Old Testament,
To get my restive soul consoled,
To get my killing pain subsided.
May be only for a few moments,
To get my thirsty heart quenched.

I was absorbed in reading the Bible:
"And when the sun was going down,
A deep sleep fell upon Abraham;
And, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him.
And he said unto Abraham,
Know of surety that thy seed shall be a stranger
In a land that's not theirs,
And shall serve them,
And they shall afflict them for four hundred years."[2]

My sleep is gone,
The night is burning.
I would cry loud and loud.
A wild cry bringing out the blood of my heart
Through my eyes.
Then, I would pray in supplication to the Lord:
O' Lord, forgive me for my sins,
I am overpowered by distracted thoughts,
I lose sight of my destination even on the right path,
Dreams of sweet water are diluted in a mirage,
O Lord forgive this bondsman,
Forgive me, my Lord.

Translated from Kashmiri by the Poet

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1. Verses from *The Wasteland* by T.S. Eliot
2. *The Old Testament*: Genesis Chapter 15:12-13

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Jayanta Krishna Sarmah

Whither Home

Brother
You're tomorrow's Ethiopia-Somalia's child
My brother had said.
It had struck me not that day.
(Perchance Brother meets you
He surely will re-iterate the same to you too.)

Fear not then,
(Where fear-stricken heart saps courage
Yet compels outrage too.)

To be an Ethiopian child
One need not just have a starving stomach
Or a skeletal trunk.

Heart burning with pent-up emotions
Impels the Eritrean to voice his misgivings.
But at the cost of his life.
And such suppression in Eritrea
Is just another face of Ethiopia!

Just here, when 'Buddha Smiled' in Pokhran
children starved in Lumbini.
When Su Kyi's tears drenched Rangoon's cell
And ULFA men laid down their arms—
Was it not just another face of Somalia then?

(Encompassing right from Eritrea to East-Timur
And Lekhapani to Mahakali

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Through mountains and seas
Stretching upon your own threshold
Inroads are being built—they say...)

No less truth in it Sir,
For when your beloved
Or my life-giver: my mother
lie dying in bed
And the life-saver 'Quinine'
Rushed from the market
becomes the life-taker.

Weren't they to enjoy the hearth
Rather led to be driven on the hearse?
Still such fate rules one and all
For where is one bound each day—to office or to coffin?

I find myself
In the midst of the streets of Mogadishu

Surely.
To be an Ethiopian or Somalian child
One need not just have a starving stomach
a skeletal trunk.
Neither be born in some forlorn African land.

Translated from Nepali by Anuradha Bhattarai

A Little Love

Mother's heart-beat says
Surely son will come back some day...

Those living thus are like the lovers
Distance making their hearts fonder
Overwhelming it with love for their loved ones

As ripe banyan seeds seek always
To grow beside the mother-plant's trunk

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As the white sands of the seas
Seem never to be quenched with salt sea water

Likewise love's little boat
Anchors life
Always give some reason to live.
Though blind one can laugh—
Though deaf one can dance—
Hands and limbs paralysed, still one can live—

But with eyes to see, ears to hear
And food in plenty to feed
Wonder why
One feels the urge to hang oneself to death!!

Translated from Nepali by Anuradha Bhattarai

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Navkirat Sodhi

Xylo

Atmosphere ends
The rain of fire
It's not even the start
When we neared the bottom

Earth falls
Rises yet again
Despite vapourisation
The tears remain

Spewing out bellowing out
Endless *déjà vu*
When you begin I end
And that gives birth to all

She dances in a crazy rage
Red hair then black
I wish to become her feet
Or the air around her skirt

Strings pull themselves
The wind is really strong
But there is no choice
Unless he wants to die

That death however
Won't be longer than a day
When he sees her eyes again
The world won't be hazy anymore

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Sight so deceptive
Defeats its own reason
Showing what is not
And yet so convincing
Though we'll never know
The truth that is sought
Is always next door
But all the while we're tired
Too lazy to reach
Destinations change face
Only travellers remain
The same as 100 BC
The sand dunes get higher

Pages grow old
Yellow bright as gold
More replete with stories
So full of monotony

Why do you need to know
Why she thinks that way?
You and I are too old
We moved on ages ago

Rhythm that sets in
Distasteful it becomes
With people and stories
And staleness sets in

To feel wobbly
In the fingers
Is better than any high
To watch him stoop
The mask still on
While the angel stares
From the corner of the eye

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Un

Yesterday or day before
Somewhere between sleep and dream
A soul called beauty passed by
Capture me she said
Free me from eternity
Make a mortal of me
Like joy, like death
Like your other subjects
Under her spell
I lived each day
Too scared to blink
Day and night
We stayed entwined
Making love bizarre
Lost in her
I lost again
She must have left
When I began to drift
Away into a dream
When my eyes unclosed
I lay alone
And Time lay dead
Next to me

Sojourney

Crossed the graveyard this morning
It's always prettier at night
Then they're all quiet
Then at least they don't fight
Once on a quiet, stormy night
I sat down to talk to them
I said I wanted to be like them
They said I already was, that I need not fight

Then the one with deep brown locks
Began to play the harp
He played he played till music became tears

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Played till all light turned to dark
That was the moment I was poor
I had lost all I ever had
At that instant I possessed
All of this universe mad

Ariel

Why tears be mourned
Do they not form
A bigger part of the space
We call our own

Float

Let me take in the stench
Till it becomes my only perfume
Let all insects with feelers and wings
Know what I hold inside
Closest to my blood
They and not this world
May one day understand
What happens to the heart
When it sees another weep

Rich Olive

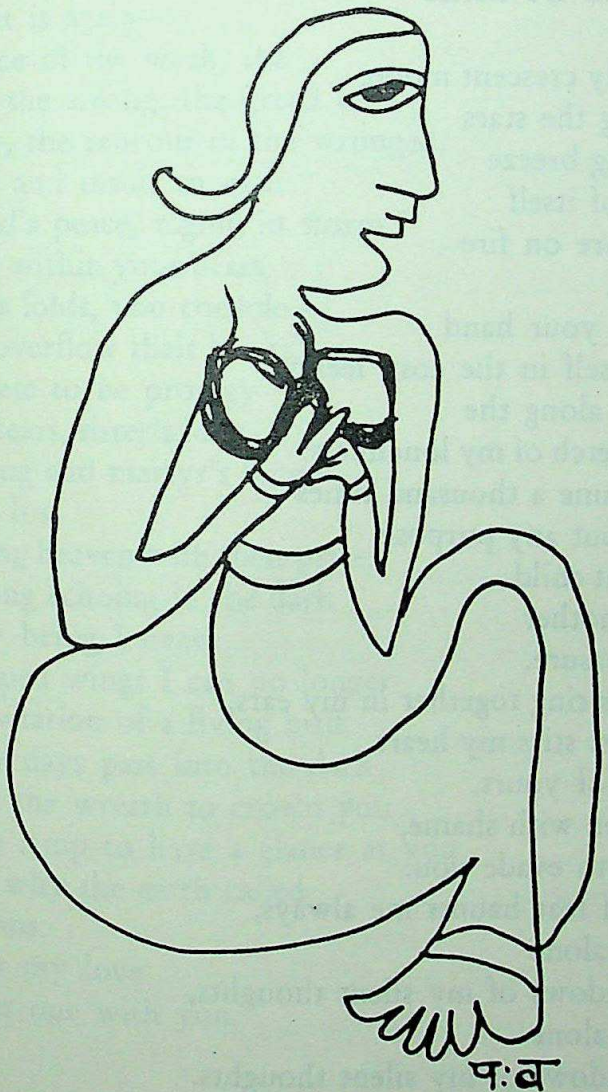
An evening free
A life borrowed
Rare scotch
Perfumed air
A stolen glance
Hidden desires
To become the mask
That is now
Weary of wearing
The daily lie

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Come home
Come now
Show me how
Truth became
The play we live today.

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Nilima Chatterjee

Let the World Be Mine

When the lonely crescent moon
wanders among the stars
when the spring breeze
is spendthrift of itself
and the trees are on fire
with flowers....
I long to hold your hand
and droop myself in the cosy feeling
of your touch along the
lengthening stretch of my loneliness.
I utter your name a thousand times
I utter it without any purpose
like an innocent child
who calls its mother
only to get pleasure.
Thousand bells ring together in my ears,
an endless thirst stirs my heart
for a glimpse of yours.
My eyes burden with shame,
I hide myself to evade you.
A flickering of fear haunts me always,
I weep sitting alone
among the shadows of my silent thoughts,
I weep sitting alone
among the shadows of my silent thoughts.
I wait for you with a feeling of pain and joy.
Come and encompass me, my love
make me open in many flowers
let the world break into my life like a flood

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the waves of my unsung melodies
wash your feet but
I know not how to reach them.
I yell, let me be proud of being your servant.
I wake up in sudden fear
I can hear the tumult of death afar
not only in New York or Washington
but very close to my heart.
I clasp your hands and my heart
plunges into the dark of your eyes,
enquiring if it is again—
"the cowardice of the weak, the
arrogance of the strong, the greed of
fat prosperity, the rancour of the wronged,
pride of race and insult to man
has burst God's peace, raging in storm."
Wrapping me within your heart
in numberless folds, you console—
though evils overflow their banks
soon they cease to be prodigy
for mother's tears, sister's love,
a wife's waiting and martyr's blood
will never be lost
without buying heaven with their price.
With your song echoing in the dark
'caves' of my being I heave
with my clipped wings I can no longer
accept the invitation of a flying bird.
So before my days pass into the dark
let me weave the wreath to crown you
let me lit the lamp to have a glance at you
let me know why the earth called
me to her arms.
Let me know my love
shall I be ever one with you.

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Praveen Gadhvi

O the Lost Moses

The waters of Chawdar lake are dumbfounded.
In the sky, the heart of the angel of history does not beat, the eyelids do not bat.
He had seen Moses in rags, Christ with crown of thorns
He had seen spartaeus nailed on the Roman highway,
Washington mounting the horse for Freedom, Equality and Fraternity,
Gandhi burning the entry permits,
Lenin beheading the Czar.
But he had never seen,
never heard,
a movement for a sip of water,
On the banks of Chawdar lake under the scorching sun.
Why have American photo journalists not come?
The Vedas, the Holy Quran and the Bible say that air, water and light are for everyone.
What a barbarous custom, which denies
These to untouchables?
O lost Moses, you did not even taste the water of Chawdar.
We do not want your mercy.
We want human rights.
We want dignity.
You thumped on the round table and thundered that there
is a third India—the India of the shadows of the untouchables,"
half naked and starving people.
They breathe in British India on the outskirts of villages on dung heaps
near skeletons of dead cattle.
Buddha and Gandhi were visitors only.
You were born and brought up on the dung heaps of the Maharwadas.
You were discarded by upper class people.

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It is better to be famished than discarded.
You told Gandhi, Jinnah and Lord Mountbatten that, as they were dividing the country they should give us only self-respect.
In the Mughal Gardens of Delhi you added some pages inked with your blood in the Constitution written for the oppressed brethrens for the first time in history.
You cut off the life cord of Manu and said that another end of this cord is lying in the self-ruled villages of Gandhi.
It is lying in the far away village Golana,
Where there are untouchable bonded labourers,
Where there is starvation,
Where there is no water for untouchables to drink.
Where there are threats and warnings to untouchables.
The waters of Chawdar lake are still untouchable.
You are only hundred years of age in the egoist blind customs of five thousand years.
O, lost Moses,
The desert path of Sinai is still endless.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Leaving the Village

We will never cross the river now, we were crossing it daily while going to plough our farms.
We were living in this village as a Banyan tree grown on the village outskirts since the drought of eighteen fifty-six Vikram Samvat.
The cyclone could not have uprooted us,
but they had sharp and burnished axes.
By the time the sun set, they cut off our legs rooted in the earth.
Small farms on riverbank, thatched huts,
Some greenish yellow-coloured clothes purchased from a village fun-fair,
Some bowls and platters,
Those robbers snatched and burnt everything.
We were drinking sweet coconut like water from the river—
Those wolves said:
'Don't drink a drop of water, it becomes impure because of you',
They like to eat and drink only raw flesh and blood.

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Those wolves did not allow us to graze a single blade of grass,
We are tired, unable to put forward even a step.
The river of the village craves that we don't leave the village.
The boundaries of the village restrain us.
But what can we do?
See, how many wolves are barking beside our blazing huts far away.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Dignity

Whose dignity?
What type of dignity?
Where was dignity?
How to salvage dignity from painful history?
None became Parshuram.
None fought wars and conquered.
The defeat was accepted cowardly,
before Phule-Ambedker
Whose dignity are you talking about?
We had no dialect, no prosody.
We had no clothes—no dress.
We had no food—no seven course dinner—
We had no etiquette.
We were never considered as human beings in the whole of history,
before Phule—Ambedker.
Where was our dignity?
We had no religion, no temple to worship.
We were bent, and bonded.
How can we see the limitless sky?
We had never seen the open sky.
before Phule—Ambedker.
The broom was in our hands,
The bucket of excreta was on our head,
The kicks of insults were on the loin,
The shoe was hanging on our back,
before Phule—Ambedker.
Whose dignity are you talking about?
What type of dignity did we have?

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Where was our dignity,
before Phule—Ambedker?

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Freedom at Midnight

We got our freedom at the stroke of midnight
We pull out our swords of enmity of past generations.
Now we seek revenge for the remaining night.
They compelled the queen of Patan to be their begum.
We were run over by Aurangzeb's horses and Shahjehan built the Taj Mahal.
If we would have erected a China Wall on the east bank of Sutluj river, the eighth great grandfather of Mehrunissa would not have crossed the river to capture Firozpur.
Now let us erect a long wall with the heaps of corpses of those people.
So that the mellow air of Lahore cannot flow into Amritsar.
We got our freedom at the stroke of midnight.
Lord Radcliffe Sir,
Please take this knife and kindly draw
a line of blood on the bare bosom of our mother.
Please divide the pages of the history of seven hundred years and give us our share.
We will sew the empire of Ashoka with that of Shivaji.

Please weigh in scales the soil of Sialkot–Pathankot.
Please split the boundaries of Pakpattan and Fazilka.
We got our freedom at the stroke of midnight.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Gandhi

No one, except you, Gandhi, come to my hut at Champaranya among flies, hunger and stench of tannery, not even Rama, Krishna and Buddha.
You are the first chapter of my unwritten history.

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You left the garden parties of Prof. Gokhale, well furnished drawing rooms of Jinnah and glittering cities of Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Madras.
Gandhi, you caught the B.B. and C.I. railways to trace me in the far corner of this vast continent-country.
There was no address of mine in history.
There was no city of mine in geography.
Even though, you came in the heavy rain on elephant back.
You stopped the galloping horses like the orders of the Lt. Governor with the blunt weapon of my worn-out voice.
No one, not even Rama, Krishna, Buddha had left floating on the slow flowing Ganga a piece of cloth to cover the chastity of a naked tribal woman.
I am limp and lame by birth,
I was not able to stand before a village officer.
But Gandhi, in no time you taught me to stand before the firing rifles of General Dyer.
Gandhi, you put the blazing crown of Lord Curzon in my bowl by your non-violent march to Dandi.
You were neither Marx, nor Lenin,
You were neither Einstein, nor Mahavir,
Even though, you rained silently on the burning city of Calcutta and extinguished the flames of the whole city.
You dropped orange juice on the heap of arms dipped in the orange and
green blood of Hindu and Moslem.
Nobody had walked up to Noakhali except you.
They were engrossed in the tunes of the national song after hoisting the national flag in the place of the Union Jack.
They were in a hurry to ascend the broken throne of the Viceroy.
At that time Gandhi, you came to my smouldering village leaning on the shoulders of Manu and Abha.
Gandhi, when you tried to step into my darkness,
Nathuram fired bullets on you,
It was the end 'Hey Ram...'
Nobody has entered my home after you, across the stains of your blood, Gandhi.
Now nobody greater than you will ever enter the dark forests of my Champaranya.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

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Ranu Uniyal

Hope

I see myself, you and him
Drifting
Sinking
Falling
Into the cold
Passionless blaze of twilight
Sleep
They say
For the next morning
Could be your
Only means of resurrection.

Guilt

Now that you have become
A presence
Everywhere
In and out
Out and in
The air is heavy
With the burden of your smiles
The streets do not smell the same
They stretch at endless nooks
And my feet are afraid of being worn out
The walls and bricks suddenly haunt me
And I with a chest soaked in guilt

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Cringe at every corner
Afraid you'd know
I have lost my face
And can find it no more.

Desire

Last summer
One such evening
I stretched my hand for gold
And saw it slither away
Like sand
Away from me
Embracing darkness that comes of coal.

Life

I wish we had met
When I was young
And you were whole

Now time's cup is full
And I did see life bring
Its own share of indigo and rain

But with a yearning for more
It becomes difficult
Almost impossible

If this life were to ask me
How did it go
I would let her know

Hard it was to live
And I happened to live
Without you by my side.

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Distance

Tomorrow, you promised .
And I almost cried
Needled anxiety, prodding fingers
Those between us smiled.
Caressing memories
Of frayed dandelions.
We raced against ties.
Feelings. Wrapt up emotions.

A toast to a lost friendship
He opened a bottle of cognac.

Inchoate and sullen like a lover's kiss
Something between us walked out
And mingled
With the banquet crowd.

Alone
I longed to crush
Your whereabouts.

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Yoseph Macwan

That Fellow

That fellow
with the weight of a shadow
is fractured.

That fellow
with the language *sans* language
is cleft.

That fellow
is ruptured wham
with the rhythm without cadence.

That fellow
is corroded from all sides,
with the sharp nails of dreams
sucking blood in veins.

That fellow is nibbled.
He is found
while excavating
in the twenty-first century
Do you know
Who is he?

Translated from Gujarati by Vijay Pandya

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Hospital and Sky

I sit in my room no.608
Sleepy darkness from the eyes drips outside the window
and convinces me of the river Sabarmati living!
Here, there, hither, thither
there are same spots of light
and up above
the vast expanse of the sky of night
also has perched like me.
In between is a mirror of flat air.
From earth to the sky
is an image of a lion of deafening silence
I stare without batting an eyelid
from the earth to the sky
and inquire
what is the suspense about us?
What is the mystery lying hidden in the sky
I immerse myself in the silence of moments.
Moments are mine
but somewhere splintering the silence
Wailing of a dog drags away these moments
and again I am emptied
and filled up
with the hospital,
the sky is left outside lurching.

Translated from Gujarati by Vijay Pandya

Light

Light frightens us
Do you know?
When you are groping in the dark
pecking something
rummaging through something
or even trying to break darkness
or trying to roast like popcorn
engrossed in yourself.

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Suddenly light jerks in and
you are dumbfounded.
Do you know as
Light frightens us...?
So does darkness frightens in light...

Translated from Gujarati by Vijay Pandya

A Monologue by an Ordinary Person

I have a wakeful nod
feel, I am stranger in my own land
I am not fortunate to smile
(Is it there?)
I am lost in the dazzle of freedom
I am sweating, sizzling, on the slopes
of mountain ranges of Himalayan scams
I run to escape
with my legs getting blood
with the stones of religion on the path.
I sink on the ground helpless
I behold materialism on all sides.
I am trapped in the
cobwebs and cobwebs hanging.
Whence have I come?
I rush to escape
but the female serpents of systems
sniff and sniff me and peck me
and lay eggs of dreams in my eyes.
For years
Bapu on the wads of currency notes goes on witnessing all these things
and smile and smile and smile
in his heart!

Translated from Gujarati by Vijay Pandya

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The Third Eye

Aabid Surti

Once there was a millionaire.

He possessed all that a millionaire could—a grand mansion with lush green lawns and flower beds. In the courtyard there was a circular swimming pool and around it were cane chairs, tables and a swing for two. But he seldom enjoyed these luxuries. Occasionally, on a holiday he would sit on the swing with his wife if she insisted endearingly. Then he would softly exchange sweet nothings with her for quite some time. The subject of conversation was invariably the same.

He: I am the happiest person in this world.

She: I am no less fortunate.

He: When I married you, friends and neighbours used to comment—a stepmother is no good for children. But you have showered more love on my children than a real mother would.

She: I have only done my duty.

The old man had a disposition that set him apart from others. Despite being a millionaire, he led a simple and austere life. He had two cars in the garage but he preferred to travel on foot or by bus. There was also a buggy in the house but no one remembered the old man ever having gone for a ride in it.

An old servant at times recalled the days when sethji preferred to ride in the carriage. Those were the days when he had a distinctive lifestyle. He would dress and walk like an Englishman, and converse in fluent English. Gone were those days and with it that life style too. Looking at him today, in a white kurta pyjama, no one would believe that this was the Seth Sunderlal of days gone by.

He went for a walk every evening. Sometimes it would take him to distant places and he would return well after dusk. His jaunts took him to unusual spots. Instead of strolling leisurely by the seaside every

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evening, he liked to break the monotony once a week or so, and wandered around the crowded Bhuleshwar area. The stalls there, selling everything from a pin to an elephant, fascinated him. The roadside vendors with their decorated food carts engaged his attention for a long time.

Yet, it was difficult to pinpoint his likes and dislikes. He was interested in all creations of nature—animals, birds, flowers, trees, the moon, stars, pebbles...That explained his love for his family also. And may be that was the reason for his happiness too.

At times he felt he had failed to make his wife happy. She was young and he was old, almost. But her serene face dispelled all his doubts. When he left the house, she saw him off with a broad smile and welcomed him back warmly. There was a sense of contentment in her words, body, eyes, and even in her sleep.

One evening he went to the Chor Bazaar – just like that – with nothing specific in mind. He walked through piles of junk, giving them a quick, curious glance and then moved on. Nails, knives, tyres, car parts, books, furniture, shoes, watches, clocks—he went past many piles of such discarded objects. In the end, a cartful of old spectacles caught his eye. A large assortment was strewn all over the cart. Old and new, with glasses and without glasses, with full frames and with no frames, with plastic frames and with silver and golden ones too.

One pair caught his fancy. It had a silver frame with dark glasses. He felt strange as he tried it out. When he looked at the vendor through the glasses, he felt he could read his thoughts. The vendor was thinking– The guy looks bankrupt but his appearance betrays his opulence. I will extract at least twenty bucks from him.

Sunderlal took off the glasses and offered two rupees! The vendor was taken aback, and somewhat irritated. "The frame alone is worth twenty five rupees. I will accept no less than fifteen."

Sunderlal put the spectacles back on the cart and pretended to leave.

"Okay, give me ten bucks...five...three..."

The deal was struck at two and a half rupees. He bought the glasses but did not let anyone know about its magical powers. He did not even tell his wife when he returned home. There was a reason for it. The wife was a woman and women cannot keep anything under the lid. Such was his experience.

His elder son, Yagya was a young man of thirty two. He was sharing half the burden of the office with his uncle Jayantilal. Shall I disclose it to him? Was it necessary? Not really, he concluded. It would be fun if it remained a secret. Again a question arose—Should I tell

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Ketaki? She was his favourite child and could keep a secret despite being a woman; she was an exception.

He went looking from one room to another and not finding her, he shared his secret with his Egyptian cat. For a moment he thought, he was no different from women, giggled and sat down on one of the dining chairs.

"A penny for your thoughts," said his wife, pulling a chair beside him.

He replied, "What do old people think of except death?"

"What a pessimistic thought," the wife snapped. "You are going to live for a long time. Ketaki is in the final year of her studies. The preparations for her marriage have to be started from now. Yagya has vowed not to get married till Ketaki is settled. His turn comes next. After both of them start a new life, Yama, the god of death will appear, but for me, not you."

"How come?" He feigned surprise, "You are still young."

"God only knows..." she replied with eyes brimming with tears, "I will not be able to bear the pain of your death. I want to be the first to go."

Both of them finished eating and got up. Today, Yagya and Ketaki had eaten earlier and Jayantilal had not yet returned from office. On working days everyone ate according to timings convenient to them. But on holidays the entire family dined together on the table .The conversation veered around various topics. Sometimes the discussions became animated.

Sunderlal would not miss the opportunity of recounting a couple of anecdotes of his youthful days (told and retold several times over). Yet, the family members gave him a patient hearing and often responded enthusiastically. He never felt he was unwanted or had lost his relevance.

His buddies always derided their family members, running down their own children. When they would recount the shortcomings of their wives, Sunderlal would thank God silently.

Before going to bed at night, he was tempted many a time to put on his magic glasses and look at everyone with his new eyes. But he curbed his desire fearing people would ridicule him for wearing dark glasses at night. Carefully tucking them under his pillow, he went over the day's happenings and closed his eyes.

Late in the night he woke up to find that his wife was not by his side. He felt slightly disturbed. He had told her countless times that she should not be too concerned about Ketaki. Even then she would get up a couple of times in the middle of the night and go across

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to her room. If she found Ketaki studying, she would put off the light, affectionately urge her to go to sleep and return.

In the morning, when the maid brought the tea trolley from the kitchen, he was looking for his magic glasses. Then he remembered, he had taken them from under the pillow and kept them in the wardrobe. He walked up to it, took them out and put them in his kurta pocket.

"Rosy," picking up a cup of tea from the trolley he asked the maid. "Weren't you supposed to go on long leave from today?"

"The weather is not pleasant for travelling," she replied.

"Whenever your leave is sanctioned, you manage to get it cancelled. It is perhaps not possible for you to detach yourself from the maya of this family. What is your salary?"

"Fifty five rupees."

"It will be raised to hundred from next month."

The maid returned to the kitchen, pleased.

The old man hurried with his tea and put on his glasses. The colours of the walls changed. Grey clouds seemed to descend in the room. His eyes narrowed on the calendar. It was Sunday. He got down from the double bed and came to the window.

The sun rays appeared gentler than usual. The lawn spread out before his eyes looked deep green. The bright hues of the flowers seemed to have turned dark red, dark violet, dark blue and dark yellow. The colour of the water in the pool also looked different. Ketaki's radiant face hardly looked bright as he spotted her strolling aimlessly along the edge of the pool.

He focussed his gaze on Ketaki. She looked worried. Pensive too. What was it? It did not take long for him to read Ketaki's thoughts. He shuddered. She had been pregnant for the past two months. Who was the culprit? Peesu of Pedder Road? Rahul of Altamount Road? Or was it the Maruti guy Kwatra?

She was desperately trying to recollect the incident—Rahul of Altamount road...That bastard had not taken precaution. He deceived me in the dark, she thought. It must be his sin that I am carrying in my belly. Abortion is the only option. I will have to go to Khandala with some excuse. The old man will have to be fooled...

Ketaki looked up. She saw her father framed in the window wearing the dark glasses. A shiver ran down her spine. Yet she managed to smile. He smiled back but it was a laboured smile.

"What are you looking at?"

His wife's words made him turn around to face her. They kept looking at each other with steady eyes. He looked odd since she had

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never seen him wearing dark glasses. And some what exotic too. If she had bumped into him on the road, she may not have even recognized him.

"When did you buy these?"

"Yesterday."

"Any problem with your eyes?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I liked them so I bought them. How do I look?"

"Impressive!"

Really? But he did not say anything. The wife sat in the easy chair with her unfinished knitting. He sat on the bed facing her. His eyes, behind the dark glasses were scanning her face. His entire focus was on her thoughts.

She was thinking...the old man has lost his mind.

He blinked his eyes behind the glasses.

God knows from where this senile man picks up these things. Yesterday, he brought a broken chair from some junk dealer. Last week he bought a termite laced pile of books. Yagya is right. We should get hold of a doctor soon to certify him insane. His property should be divided equally amongst all family members. The old man is not fit to live in the society. The right place for him to rot is an asylum only.

"You look upset."

Sunderlal's words jolted her but she recovered instantly, "I had started knitting this sweater for Ketaki a couple of months back. I will have to complete it soon. The winter has already set in."

Before his wife could say anything more, Jayantilal came in and stood, leaning against the wall. "Big brother," he said in a playful tone, looking at the old man, "your glasses are the talk of the town. Ketaki was telling me that you look like a hippy."

"And what do you think?"

"Ketaki is not wrong. The frame is indeed an antique piece. Can I try them on?"

He said a firm no. Then he felt he could have been less abrupt. A gentler refusal would have worked just as well.

"Please...if you would just let me wear them once!"

This time he was gentle. "Jayanti, if you wear these glasses, you would be labelled a lunatic."

The old man seems to be telepathic; the wife was cursing him silently. I would be set free if only he would die.

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"Jayanti," Sunderlal continued, "to tell you the truth these spectacles are not what they appear to be."

"What are they, then?"

"Magical."

Jayantilal laughed.

Ignoring it, he carried on, "You do not believe me. Do you? But I will prove it. You think of anything and I will tell you what your thoughts are about."

The wife looked up again and kept staring. Jayantilal was quiet. He started thinking for fun...His favourite topic to dwell on was Sunderlal's wife, his own Bhabhi.

Like a headmistress of a girl's hostel, she would take a round of the mansion every night to see if any light was on, especially in Ketaki's bedroom. She would switch it off. And under the cover of darkness, she would stealthily slip into Jayanti's room. After satisfying her mind and body, she returned to the master bedroom.

"Big brother, tell me what I was thinking about?"

"Jayanti...Jayanti..." Sunderlal was breathing heavily. "You were thinking about the office work. The auditors are expected tomorrow and that must be the cause of worry for you."

Jayantilal let out a hearty laugh.

Sunderlal could not bear that laughter. He slowly came out of the mansion and sat by the poolside. He was shaken to the core, his heart was beating wildly and his lips were trembling...God! These glasses have blackened the bright faces of my family members. Could these be really true?

No, of course not. My wife worships me with her heart and soul. Jayantilal is totally innocent, Ketaki is untainted, chaste. And Yagya, my own son can never think of dividing the property. It is my blood that is coursing through his veins. The magic glasses may throw up dirty faces but I won't believe...ever...

He tried his best to dismiss it as a bad dream. But it was easier said than done. The jeering faces would keep popping up before him, mock him and vanish. He just stared with dazed eyes.

In the end he made up his mind. The dark glasses may actually be revealing the truth. To check out, he went to the kitchen. The maid and the old servant were busy preparing lunch. He went and stood behind at a safe distance. Now he fixed his gaze on the maid.

The maid was thinking...last night also she could not succeed in her plan to steal the jewellery box from the cupboard. She did not get a chance though she had made a foolproof plan—to remove the key

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from the bunch of keys in the evening and walk out with the jewel box at night. Then catch the first train and vanish into thin air.

Unfortunately she could not lay her hands on the keys. Still she made a last attempt at night. She had gone towards the bedroom but seeing some movement inside, she had rushed back to the servant's quarter. She was thinking hard, really hard. She was cursing herself. She hated herself for failing a third time.

Sunderlal advanced slowly towards her.

"Rosy!"

She turned. Seeing the master in the dark glasses, she left her work, wiped her hands and stood facing him.

"I have come to ask a few questions."

"Sure sir."

"Simply say yes or no to my queries."

"Very well, sir."

"You tried to steal the keys last evening."

"What?"

"True or false?"

"But...but..."

"Last night you tried again but sensing some movements inside, you went back."

The maid fell at his feet and sobbed bitterly.

Now there was not a shadow of doubt left in his mind. Everything the glasses revealed was true. Sunderlal came straight from the kitchen to the living room. A round table conference was in progress. All the members of the family were sitting around Jayantilal, discussing some serious matter. The moment they saw the old man they were silent.

Taking a vantage position from where he could see everyone, Sunderlal asked, "Jayanti, what were you talking about?"

"Nothing in particular, really. Today being a holiday, we were just chatting."

"And...what about you, Ketaki?"

"Me too just gossiping, Dad."

Then he looked at his wife, "And you, my dear?"

"Why are you asking such silly questions?"

"I have yet to ask many more. Where shall I start from?"

Everyone was looking at each other. No one could guess what was brewing in the old man's mind.

"I think it would be best to start with Ketaki, please stand up." She rose at once.

"Where do you go after your College breaks for the day?"

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Ketaki could not grasp the implication, "I...actually I come home straight."

"And when you don't come home straight..."

"Dad..."

"That is not the reply to my question."

"What...dad...what do you want to know?"

"Just whose child is it that you are carrying for the last two months?"

Lightning seemed to strike not just Ketaki but the entire family.

"Dad, do you know what you are saying? Are you in your senses?" Sunderlal carried on, "Is it Peesu of Pedder Road, Rahul of Altamount Road or the Maruti guy Kwatra?"

This was a staggering blow for Ketaki. She sank into the chair, covered her face with her hands and sobbed uncontrollably.

"Jayanti!"

It was his turn. He stood up shakily.

First question. "What time do you return from office?"

"Don't you know it?"

"I want to know from the horse's mouth."

"Sometimes at nine, sometimes at ten."

"Then?"

Jayantilal realized now. Trying to remain cool, he replied boldly, "Then I go to bed."

"Alone?"

"What!"

"Alone or with your Bhabhi?"

Seismic tremors had started rocking one and all. Ketaki looked up, her face wet with tears. Yagya was assessing the situation shrewdly, planning his move.

As Jayantilal fumbled for words, Sunderlal's wife got up audaciously to save his skin. "You should be ashamed to talk like that."

"You bitch!" Sunderlal raised his voice, "You are sermonizing me, you of all people, a disgraceful woman! I am ashamed to call you a woman because a woman has her dignity, her honour, her Laxman Rekha. The woman who crosses that line is not a woman but a whore. Got it?"

"Jayanti," she turned to him, "your brother has accused all of us. Tell him; whatever he has said is not true. Absolute lies. There is nothing but madness in his words."

"That my loving son Yagya will tell," said Sunderlal sarcastically. "Yagya, where are you off to? To divide the property? I am still alive,

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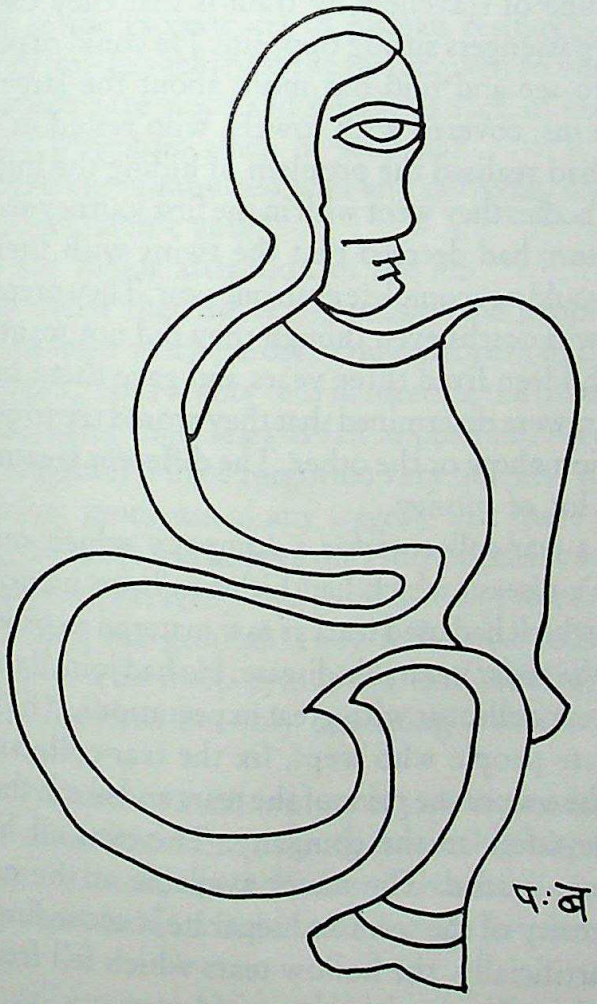
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son. I have enough energy to take charge of the business. The day I am bedridden..."

Yagya walked to the telephone, lifted the receiver and dialled a number. "Hello! Hello! Doctor, I am Yagya. Please come to our house immediately. My dad, about whom I had spoken to you last week, has gone completely insane."

Translated from Hindi by Anil Sud

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The Tear-Cow

E.P. Sreekumar

The misfortune of travellers by train is that they cannot evade the gaze of the passengers sitting opposite. He could make out that they were anxious to see and find out more about the larger than normal heads of the twins, covered with towels, who rested in his lap and his wife's lap. He had realised the problem of hiding the huge heads which did not suit the bodies they went with in the first journey with the children.

The doctors had decreed that the twins with their heads which kept growing would not complete even one year. They prepared themselves to accept the twin deaths even though they did not want to bow before fate. But the children lived three years and gave them hope. They too, like any parents, were determined that they would try to cure the children of this disease somehow or the other. The different treatments they kept trying took a lot of money.

He was a tear-collector for a company which made a medicine from tears for a disease which had hitherto been incurable. It was the first company which had used tears as raw material to produce a medicine which treated the so-far incurable disease. He had joined the multinational company as a tear collector with great expectations. The job was simple. He had to locate people who wept, fix the tear-collecting machine on the eyes, give the owner the price of the tears and reach the tears collected in the machine safely to the company. This was all he had to do.

Tears were graded. The meter available at the company would measure the density of the tears and separate it according to the quality. Tears created artificially, the hollow tears which fell from laughter, the flow of tears created by tear gas were of lower quality. They said that the tears which welled up from the bottom of the heart and flowed out in the pain of the soul was of a higher medicinal quality. The price paid was also hiked according to the quality of the tears.

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Earlier, it had not been difficult to obtain tears. As time went by, tears became scarcer. Though there were more people weeping, less tears were produced by the weepers. So said a survey made on the subject. The manager revealed these findings in his speech in the meeting of the tear collectors.

You know that we shall have to stop production and close the company if we do not get enough raw material. If we can produce more medicine for that dread disease, we can save the lives of some more people who expect death from the fatal disease. Remember that each drop of tear that you collect saves a life. And therefore, there is no social service greater than the job you are doing...

The company wanted only people who had acquired high qualifications in the art of Business Management. The manager of the department of raw material collection was one such person. Besides, he was well-versed in the esoteric art of human resource management.

"Not one of you has achieved the target given to you. Shameful..."

The manager's gaze was fixed sternly at each of the one hundred and fourteen tear collectors when he said that.

"You are getting reimbursed well and correctly for each drop of tear that you collect, aren't you?"

That was the major attraction of the job.

You must realise that the tear glands of the people have started drying up and you must work harder. You must rush to the spots where tragedies have struck. Your ability tells in meeting the maximum number of people and collecting their tears as fast as possible. Any great sorrow from losses and tragedies will be forgotten very quickly. Remember that it is only in the first moments of any tragedy that there will be tears...

How many journeys had he been on! He thought about it. Pilgrimages in search of disaster and tragedy and pain. The hot teardrops could not be allowed to fall on the ground. They had to be collected carefully before that and sold. The sharp eyes of the tear-collector, which never filled themselves, searched for only one thing—where could you find tear filled eyes?

He learnt to cultivate the inhumanity of a money lender as he collected the tear drops of those who were burning in terrible tragedies, the awful sorrows of personal losses, the hellish sorrows of disasters. He learnt to leave his emotions behind in his wanderings in search of the day's bread.

"Hungry..." one of the twins tried laboriously to lift his head and whimpered.

His wife looked at him. The fruits they had carried for the journey were all over.

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"Just let's reach the next station, son..." he said.

The other twin lay on his lap unable to bear the terrible weight of his own head.

"That huge head is full of brains." His wife would keep repeating. It was since the doctor said that the children's brains were more developed than their age warranted that she had started this refrain. Both of them had started dreaming since then.

That the expanding heads would become larger and larger...It was the fate of children like these...They had forgotten that the doctor had also said this once. The fact that the heads were no longer growing so rapidly had given their hopes impetus.

The medicines were making them hungry, they were so strong. How many pills they swallowed a day. He was spending more than half his income on medicines already.

When tears became scarcer, journeys became more necessary. One day, when he returned from one such long journey, he had recognised that his mother had become a victim of Alzheimer's disease. Though he knew that it was nearly impossible to recover lost memories, he rendered his homage to duty and gave his mother an expensive treatment that held out a hope.

The Manager of the company gathered the tear-collectors who were struggling to meet their procurement targets for a conference and spelt out the new policy.

It was becoming useless to go in search of tears. So, we have taken the decision that we will manufacture tears in the company itself. We need working tear glands for that. What you have to do now is to bring people who have the capacity to produce tears continuously to the factory. We will make them stay here for a period of one or two years depending on their capacity to produce tears. We will meet all their expenses. If they stay here, we can medicate them to increase the production of tears. We can gather tears many times as the eyes fill up. We can use techniques to bring about the flow of tears. We can show them videos of tearjerkers. We can let sorrowful music flood the place. We can see to it that circumstances that provoke the flow of tears are always available.

The Manager paused for a moment. Then he continued in answer to the questions that shadowed the two hundred and twenty eight eyes which were fixed on him, "For the time being, we'll call them our tear-cows. You will be allotted targets of the tear-cows that each of you is expected to bring. There are attractive incentives to those who perform

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well. But, if you are not able to get to the target within the time fixed, you will have to quit. There will be no mercy shown."

He ended the meeting there as though to emphasise that there was no room for further questions.

When told that all their expenses would be met and that they would be rewarded well, a number of people volunteered to be tear-cows. But quite a few were rejected in the medical tests. The main criterion was the productivity of the tear glands. A hundred and fourteen people rushed around the country in search of tear-cows, anxious about facing a jobless future if they could not meet the target on time.

He was not bad at rushing at all. The memory of the problems at home gave his legs strength which they did not possess and speed they could not aspire to. But all this only brought him close to the target. He was still one short.

As the time given for getting the tear=cows came near its end, he was rushing around madly in search of his last prey. Finally, he returned home in despair, did not eat, did not sleep, kept muttering to himself as if he was insane. His wife tried to console him, to calm him down.

"What's the point of your saying all this? Where will I get hold of another one? In another two days, everything will end."

"I have an idea..."

He looked a question at his wife.

"That one person you need to complete your quota—I can be that one."

He was shocked.

"You know how much I weep here. All that is being wasted now. If we could get money for each drop of that..."

"No, darling, not that."

"Yes. I'm the only one who can save your job. Also, I have stocks of tears to last a lifetime. If we convert that to money, we'll never have to suffer again. Our children will be saved. Mother's illness can be treated...."

They got down from the train, bought the children food, and reached the gates of the company by autorikshaw. It was the last day of the time granted to him to attain his target.

The twins were very happy as this was the first time they were going on a long trip. They laughed aloud looking around and enjoying the sights without lifting their heavy heads. They kept asking questions about the things they saw around them.

When his wife was taken away for the final scanning and other more complicated tests after the preliminary examinations, he was almost sure that she would be found suitable. With this completion of his target his job would become permanent.

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He could see the tear-cows stand still like statues in the cell-like rooms nearby. All their faces looked as though they would burst into tears any moment. He was sure that the people he had brought along too would be among them. He and his companions had been seeking out all the sorrows of the land and imprisoning them. When all the sorrows had been imprisoned and all the tears had been drawn out... He dreamt vainly that only happiness and pleasure would remain in the land.

After a while, she came back, in the company uniform of the tear-cows, escorted by a couple of people. The uniform carried the number allotted to the new tear-cow. Her face had changed too. She looked as though she would burst into tears at any moment. She stood silently before him. The twins lay on his two shoulders. They where whimpering as though they realised that something unpleasant was taking place.

"Will my children be there when I return?" It was a whisper with the lips hardly moving. She caressed their heads as though she was a puppet.

One of the twins gathered up all his strength and tried to lift his head as though in a mad impulse. The small eyes which were straight for a moment saw his mother in full.

"Amma...," he sobbed.

Her lips quivered. Her eyes started filling with tears.

The woman who escorted her said, "Let's go..." It was time for collection.

He thought of his mother who had lost her memory, whom they had left locked up in the house.

"Let's go, children...," he said.

"If you wait a little while, you can take the payment for the first collection," the escort told him. And she extended a copy of the contract that had been signed by his wife to him.

The terms of the contract made it clear that the tear-cow could not return home until the last drop of tears from the tear glands had been extracted. The escort was taking his wife into the room by then.

He stood outside the glass cabin watching them collect his wife's tears. She was crying silently. As he and the escort watched, waiting for the first drops of tears, what fell into the collecting bottle was red droplets of blood-tears.

Translated from Malayalam by Prema Jayakumar

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Soni, Our Cow

Gangadhar Gadgil

Soon after my father was settled and earning in Mumbai, he bought some land in the village of Gondavala and built a house and re-established his connection with the rural background from which he sprang. He also bought a big pedigree cow in Bombay and put her in the cowshed. The house of a farmer and particularly a Brahmin farmer without a cow was like a woman without a Kumkum mark on her forehead. So Balgi, as the cow was named, gave the rural home a sanctity, an authenticity, which it needed.

The big cow was a quiet, well behaved animal, who it seems won the heart of all of the family particularly of the womenfolk in our house. Unfortunately she developed some ailment of the neck and died suddenly. I was too young when that happened. I therefore do not at all remember what she was like. But from the talk about her in the family, it seems that she was a very well-behaved cow. She never ate the foodstuffs my grandma spread out in the backyard to dry so that they could be stored to last for a whole year without being damaged. She was a big cow but never frightened anybody and particularly the woman and children in the family, with a hostile rush at them with horns aimed. And she was so considerate that she gently stepped aside if she found a baby crawling in the backyard. My grandmother, the most respected and important person in the family, remembered the cow with a great deal of affection. Balgi grew and at the same time became very gentle, as years elapsed. Grandma would tell me that Balgi the cow was as tall as a standing person.

I found this a little confusing. For my dad's head was much taller than my head or even my mom's head. So I asked as tall as whose head?

Grandma whose hearing had become rather poor often did not

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hear the question or pretended not to have heard it. But sometimes she did hear it and said, "Oh well! Let us say she was as tall as that shelf over there." Well! When she said this she waved her hand in the direction of two or three shelves, that stood in the kitchen. But the trouble was each of them was of a different height. But I did not pursue the matter any further for I was more interested in making grandma tell me the interesting story of the cow. I had really heard it umpteen times, but grandma narrated it so nicely that I always wanted to hear it from her, particularly because it concerned me. But sometimes Grandma was too busy and did not tell the story. I however, so enjoyed listening to it that I waited patiently till she had finished her chores and then asked, "Grandma she was very well behaved wasn't she? I mean the cow, and she brought good luck to the family, didn't she?"

However, when grandma had finished churning the butter milk and extracted from it a goodly amount of butter, she had the time and the inclination to tell the rest of the story.

I don't know why, but she always found it necessary to lower her voice to a whisper, when she told us about nice things that happened in our family. Probably she did not want such stories of good luck to be heard by other people. That she believed would arouse their jealousy and make them inclined to bring harm to us. So when she lowered her voice to a whisper, I moved close to her. She then stopped depositing the butter in its earthen receptacle and said in a more lowered whisper, "You know what, the month in which we bought her and tied her in our cowshed, your uncle got a raise in his salary of no less than fifty rupees."

Grandma then nodded with a smile and said, "And your uncle gave me all of those fifty additional rupees, which he had earned." She then looked at me with a meaningful smile, "Let us see what you do when you grow up and start earning a big salary."

My grandma loved to have money, which she put in her brass container, and looked at it often with great satisfaction. However, when somebody got married or had a baby she dipped her hand in the brass receptacle and gave a little something to him or her. She was, however, more generous on special occasions like a wedding.

She wanted me to grow up and become a big powerful and highly paid officer like a Mamalatdar. Actually in those days a Mamalatdar's post was no longer the most highly paid post, that could be occupied by an Indian. But it was so when Grandma was young and it had remained so for her even in her old age.

Anyway I used to laugh secretly when she said so: For I had no

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intention of giving my first salary to her or to my mom, or anybody else. I intended to spend it on buying nice clothes and sweets like expensive chocolates for myself. And I intended to be not a minor government functionary like a Mamalatdar but a barrister who, I had been told, shovel money into the capacious pockets of their black gowns.

At this point Grandma returned to the theme of the cow and fondly remembered how nice, considerate and well-behaved she was. She said, "She was really wonderful. I used to spread grains, and lentils in the backyard on a piece of cloth to dry them for storage. Those are a temptation for the cattle. But Balgi was so well-behaved that she never yielded to the temptation to eat them. She never ate the growing crops in our or our neighbour's unguarded farm. She even allowed the women in our house to touch and feed her. Even your aunt who is very timid gave her without fear the special evening feed which she was given while she was being milked."

If my aunt was around at that time, she protested and said in an angry whisper, which grandma could not hear, "Oh! I am timid, am I? If a cow threatens to gore me with her sharp horns, is it not wise to avoid being gored. Is one expected to let her gore and break one's bones!"

Luckily, Grandma never could hear auntie's carefully modulated whisper. She continued to sing the praise of Balgi, my father's first family cow.

She eventually reached what to me was the high point of the story. Grandma said, "Once when you were a crawling baby, you crawled and went straight under the cow between her four legs."

To hear that made me shudder. I wondered though how as a baby I could do anything so foolish and risky. I guess I was a very young baby then who could not understand anything at all, so I could ask Grandma. "How small was I then?"

"Oh well! You were as small as say this forehand of mine." For Grandma this was an unimportant detail, and she got preoccupied with seeing whether the churning of the butter milk, had produced butter, which was a very valuable product for the kitchen.

I, however, could not believe that I could have been at any time as small as her forehand, and I said, "Oh! No! I couldn't have been that small and stupid."

If Grandma paused in telling the story at that un juncture to attend to the important task of gathering the butter, I grew quite frightened and excited. For a while she paused the cow could have stepped on

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me. So I urged Grandma to continue with the story and rescue me from the dire predicament.

But for Grandma that was an unimportant detail, She said, "Oh well, we don't know how long you sat there in between the four legs of the cow. But the cow stood quietly until we noticed what had happened and rushed to rescue you from underneath her belly."

I heaved a sigh of great and happy relief when Grandma said so. At this point Grandma would finish gathering butter from the churned buttermilk and I began to look longingly at the big ball of butter for getting my daily helping of it. But I did not want to show how keenly I was looking forward to getting it. So I asked Grandma. "And how much milk did Balgi give every time she was milked?"

Grandma would then pause for a while to select a pot that would correctly indicate the milk Balgi gave when she was milked. Then she pointed to a biggish narrow necked pot and said, "Well! Do you see that pot. It used to get completely filled when she was milked. Even a buffalow, who normally gives more milk than a cow, could not match her in the matter of giving milk."

Sometimes my mother used to be around when Grandma said this. She was in the habit of calling a spade a spade even when she was speaking to Grandma...She said, "Oh no! I have never seen the cow Balgi giving that pot full of milk."

Grandma did not like to be contradicted, she cried, "How do you know? When Balgi calved you had gone to your mother's house to have your baby."

This was promptly contradicted by my mom. She said, "Yes. I certainly had gone to my maternal home. But I returned in two months and then was here for three months and in those three months I saw every day morning and evening how much milk Balgi gave and it never filled fully that narrow necked pot ever."

My Grandma was not the one to take such back talk lying down. She retorted, "I am the one who handled the milk then as I do now. I used to warm the milk and then add a little buttermilk to some of it to make curd from it. And our Laxman everyday used this very narrow necked pot to milk Balgi and it used to be full to the brim. Sometimes the milk was just a little less. But it never was as less as you say it was."

At this point my mother being the daughter-in-law used to lower her voice but she could not bring herself to stop arguing. She said, "It was to me that Laxman handed over the milk, and the pot was filled only three quarters."

But although my Grandma was hard of hearing, her ears became remarkably sharp when she was involved in an argument.

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So she heard my mother's retort, got up with remarkable alacrity and taking the narrow necked pot in hand, said, "Yes, Laxman used this pot for milking the cow and it used to be full to the very brim."

My mother though a daughter-in-law never yielded ground in an argument. She took the narrow necked pot from Grandma's hand filled it three quarters with water and said: "That used to be the amount of milk given by the cow Balgi."

Grandma would put her fingers in the pot and then express her sharp disagreement with an emphatic nod. She said, "Ho. The milk used to be much more. Why, I used to give you no less than half a seer of milk to drink when you had a baby."

This was enough to upset mom and she cried, "Good heaven. Poor me. Half a seer of milk indeed! All the milk I got to drink was a small cupful in the morning and an equally niggardly amount in the evening and even the small cup was not filled to the brim."

Mother's-in-law used to take pleasure in denying things to their daughter's-in-law in the traditional society.

Laxmi, my aunt, who was a part of our joint family, felt excluded from this entire argument. But she suspected that she was also being blamed and said, "Well! When Mother-in-law used to ask me to give the milk to you, I always used to fill the cup to the brim."

Grandma was happy to have Aunt's support in this argument and she said, "And was'nt it you Laxmi who was giving milk to Ambu every day."

Ambu incidentally was the name of my mother.

Luckily often at this juncture my dad or uncle came home from the offices where they worked. But if their arrival was delayed for some reason or other, the argument became quite heated. It hurt the feeling of my mom and aunt began to cry, while my mom banged the door loudly shut herself in a room and even at times banged her head on the wooden door frame as a punishment, she inflicted on herself simply because there was nobody else she could blame or punish.

All this goes to show the importance the cow Balgi had in our house. Yeshya our cowherd used to tell me that the cow Balgi was very affectionate and when we returned to Mumbai at the end of our holidays, the cow used to miss us and continually shed tears for nearly two to four days.

Balgi eventually gave birth to a female calf and my Grandma affectionately named her Soni, the golden cow. However, she was exactly the opposite of her mother. Balgi was quite tall. But Soni was small. She hardly reached the waist of grown up man. Balgi had nice curved

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horns, while Soni had almost none. The two small apologies for horns, which she carried on her head, used to move back and forth if one touched them. She was almost a hornless cow. But she made up for this lacunae by being a nasty cow. Her nastiness was written all over her face, and she used to exhibit it whenever she got a chance to do so. She would eat up the grains and other foodstuffs my Grandma used to spread in the backyard for being dried in the sun. In fact, she used to peep into Grandma's kitchen and if she was not around, ate up even the food she served in the plates for us to eat. Although small in size she could jump across the tall fence that separated our neighbour's farm from our farm. She did so, if nobody was looking and ate up his crop to our considerable embarassment. Our cowherd was sharply taken to task by us and by our neighbours, when she did so and he used to whack her with a cudgel for her misbehaviour. But that did not deter her from doing so again, whenever an opportunity was offered. In fact, he used to give me a cudgel and incite me to join him in whacking her. He had told me that the big white bull with sharp horns, who was Soni's dad was a foul tempered bull and had foiled all attempts to yoke him to a cart. Why, he had even upturned or broken, the cart's to which attempts were made to yoke him. Yesheya, therefore used to pray to god to inflict an incurable disease on that bull. He wanted the same disease to be inflicted on Soni, she might be small in size and hornless but she ventured to gore big bulls and even buff slows and although she had no horns, she would gore strong big farmers, when they were not looking. She had decided, it seems, not to have any calves and give us milk. Atleast she had not done so until she was five year's old. Another cow in our stable had calved twice at the same age and given us potfuls of milk. But not Soni.

In our family, there were two sets of opinions, on what ought to be done with Soni. My dad was very kind hearted when it came to animals. He was also a great optimist. He hoped that however nasty Soni was, she would eventually calve as all cows do and give us atleast two pot fulls of milk every day in the morning and evening. In any case he was opposed to selling her off. For only a butcher was likely to buy her. Being a kind hearted man, my dad abhorred sending animals into butcher's clutches. After all we were Brahmins and Brahmins never killed or sold animals to butchers. Apart from being kind hearted my father was an incorrigible optimist. He felt that being a cow Soni would ultimately calve and give us milk. She, he used to say, would be a different cow, when she calved and became a mother. My mother used to share his views, as she was neither interested in nor knowledgeable

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about cows. In other matters, she generally disagreed with dad, who, she thought, lacked worldly wisdom, as most women in India do about their husbands.

My uncle, who was a part of our joint family, was the opposite of my dad, in temperament and nature. He believed that Soni should be sold off before people began to suspect that she was a barren cow unlikely to calve and yield milk for the owner's family as horned cow should. Naturally, my aunt had the same opinion and even my Grandma seemed to lean towards uncle's opinion. Inevitably therefore, there were often heated arguments in the family over what should be done with Soni.

My dad loved to munch little tit bits during the course of a day, and he was munching freshly scoured raw coconut as he walked back and forth in our covered front yard. While he did so, he noticed our cow Soni grazing in the grassland adjacent to our front yard. Yeshya, our cowherd had tied a heavy piece of wood round her neck to ensure that she did not run and gore anybody. This was a precaution usually taken in our rural areas to avoid, ill-tempered cattle from rushing at and goring unsuspecting people. Soni was used to having such a heavy piece of wood tied round her neck, and she pulled it with her as she grazed hungrily. Sometimes it got entangled in her feet and she stumbled. I saw that and smiled feeling that she was getting her deserts.

But my kind hearted dad was outraged and protested "Who has done this cruel, inhuman deed? Are all of you so hard hearted as to do this to a poor animal that cannot protest. Yeshya! Where is that lad? Call him here and I will tie a heavy piece of wood round his neck. He will then realize how much suffering he has inflicted on a poor dumb animal."

He then looked at mom who stood in the covered but open lobby of our house adjacent to the backyard. He eyed her with annoyance and asked, "Where is that lad Yeshya. Have you sent him to run an errand and buy some household provisions from the grocer's shop as you are in the habit of doing?"

At that juncture my uncle came out in that lobby and said, "Ah! What is upsetting you? Oh. That piece of wood tied round the cow's neck. Well! It was I who told Yeshya to tie it. For, she is a nasty cow. Though small in size she jumps across tall fences, enters our neighbour's farms and eats their crops. She is quite a rogue and jumps across over fence when nobody is looking."

My father was not convinced, and was still in a bad, temper. He said, "Oh! How can she be so cunning, she is after all a mere cow,

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not a clever human being. I think this Yeshya is a shirker. He must be going off somewhere or falling asleep when he should be tending the cattle. If she jumps into our neighbour's farms, don't release her for grazing and feed her when she is tathered in the cowshed. But don't do this to a dumb animal. This is terribly inhuman."

My uncle accompanied my dad as he moved forward, to untie the piece of wood tied round Soni's neck and said. "Please, listen to me and do as I say. Let us sell off this cow and get rid of her. We have to spend money on feeding her and listen to angry neighbour's complaints and compensate them for the damage she does to their farms.

Dad said, "May be she is nasty. But that does not mean we should be so unhuman as to tie a heavy piece of wood round her neck."

Soni seemed to understand what dad was trying to do and leaned down to facilitate his effort. But he found it difficult to untie the knot tied by cowherd Yeshya's strong hands. So uncle offered to help and untie the dumb cow. Finding Soni in a cooperative mood, I too took an opportunity to give a friendly, affectionate pat to Soni. After she was freed, dad fed her a piece of the soft and sweet coconut meat he was eating.

Thereafter we all were walking homewards satisfied with our kind deed. But when we reached the front yard, I suddenly found uncle flying in the air and then he fell down in an awkard heap. And thereafter I saw the cow Soni jumping around merrily.

My dad rushed to give a helping hand to uncle and asked with affectionate concern, "Goodness! Are you hurt badly?"

My aunt rushed towards uncle. She being a deeply devoted wife was almost in tears.

My Grandma sensed that something was wrong and rushed out to help uncle. My dad, helped uncle to limp to his room and lie down in his bed. I too wanted to be of help and tried to hold uncle's forehand.

But he pushed aside with annoyance. While helping uncle to get into his bed, my father said with angry concern, "I must say that this Soni is the nastiest cow I have ever seen. Is she utterly insane!"

Uncle pressed his paining waist and cried, "I have been saying all along, that this Soni is a very nasty animal. She cannot even notice and much less respond to the kindness showed to her. We should not look after her. Do arrange to get rid of her forthwith."

My aunt was furious and began to give vent to her strong feelings. She muttered angrily, "A mere cow and nasty one at that, I don't know why so much is being made of her. It seems in this house people care

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more for a nasty cow than for members of the family." She then rushed to uncle's room, with a bottle of suitable oil for massaging his paining limbs.

My mom quietly resumed her household work with a guilty feeling. If my father did anything wrong, she, a dutiful and devoted wife, shared his guilt.

My Grandma was furious and came out in the front lobby of our house and loudly gave vent to her feelings. She ordered our cowherd Yeshya not to give Soni even an armful of stored grass to eat. She said, "This is the nastiest cow our family has ever owned and we should get rid of her as soon as we can."

My father and uncle were dutiful and obedient sons in the traditional world and generally did not do anything that Grandma did not like. So my dad sat aside all his kind feelings and told Yeshya to find out if anybody wanted to buy that cow. But feed her a bundle of cut and stored grass. "If she has a pinched and starved look nobody would buy her." He said.

The households in our village and even in the neighbouring villages had experienced the nastiness of Soni, and nobody was inclined even to glance at her. Let alone buying her. They hoped that the cow would be sold to some far off buyer. So nothing happened for the next couple of weeks. Soni, whom we did not want, was very much with us, making as much of a nuisance of herself, as she was used to do.

When we were in this unpleasant predicament, Yashya once called aside my dad and informed him in a solemn confidential voice, "The cow is lowing for the last couple of days."

Dad conveyed the information equally solemnly to uncle and even Grandma in an equally solemn voice confirmed that she too had heard the cow lowing at night.

I knew that as horses neigh, cows low and goats cry Ba ba. So I did not understand why lowing of Soni should be regarded as a very important piece of information. I asked my mother the question, but she avoided answering it. She considered me too young and foolish to be given this adult piece of information and scolded me saying, "Why must you want to know everything? You will learn all this when you grow up. Go out and play in the yard with other kids."

Later on Yeshya took two rupees from dad and after tying a rope round soni's neck took her somewhere. He returned only after a lapse of four hours. And since then all talk of selling off soni suddenly ceased. Grandma's feelings towards her underwent a sea change and she began to feed her not only grass but more nourishing feed and reminded Yeshya

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often to give her plenty of stored grass to eat. He patted her kindly and even uncle who was not in the habit of smiling and cutting little jokes, said to me, "Well! It looks as if you kids are going to feast on tasty milk of a newly calved cow."

This development encouraged my dad, who was disinclined to sell Soni, as she was only likely to be bought by a butcher. He asserted over and over again, "Well! I knew that she would calve this year, and that is precisely what is happening."

Everybody had to reluctantly agree with him and I was amazed at how my dad always proved to be right.

Later on when in the next school vacation we went to Gondavala, I found that Soni's tummy had become considerably enlarged.

My dad, an incorrigible optimist and a kind hearted man was pleased and said, "Well! I was right when I insisted that we should not be in a hurry to sell her off."

He then asked Yeshya to buy a sackful of special, nutritious feed for her, and she began to get large helpings of it everyday which she ate with great relish and lowed for having more of it.

Even grandma had now become hopeful of the cow calving and tied round her neck a thick thread blessed by Lord Ganapati in the nearby temple to ward off the effect of envious glances.

Uncle was still not convinced that the cow would really calve and give a big pot full of milk and said shaking his head, "Well! I still have my doubts that her udders will yield a decent quantity of milk. She is stingy when it comes to giving."

My ever optimist dad asserted, "Oh, I am sure she will give a goodly quantity of milk. Don't judge about that by her small size. Even small animals do yield a goodly quantity of milk." He would then look at her enlarged stomach and try to guess when she was likely to calve.

My mom was as usual supportive of dad in such matters and said, "Goodness Me: Her tummy has become enormous. Now let us hope she gives birth to a big healthy bull."

My aunt was less knowledgeable in such matters as she hailed from the big holy town of Nasik and not from rural Konkan.

But our household hailed from rural Konkan and they all laughed that such a question should at all be asked. I joined in the laughter. Though I really didnot know why a male calf was preferable to a female calf.

That derisive laughter annoyed aunt and she said, "Oh, I was brought up in a town and therefore I am not as knowledgeable as you are but do tell me why it is preferable that a calf should be a bullock rather than a cow."

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Uncle tried to explain things to her. He said, "A bull is useful all the time. He can be yoked to a cart or a plough and meet such daily important needs.

Aunt said, "But a female calf yields milk, doesn't she?"

Uncle could not satisfactorily refute this observation so he said, to aunt, "Oh! You just don't understand."

This evoked general laughter and aunt walked away in a huff.

As for me, I was quite confident that Soni would give birth to a little bullock and I and our cowherd Yeshya decided on a name for the stale calf. That pleased me so much, that I jumped around crazily as I had seen calves do.

I went so far in making my imitation realistic, that I trampled the things my Aaji had spread out in our backyard to dry before they were stored for the wet months of monsoon. I even tried to jump across the fence as calves sometimes do and in doing so I twisted my foot. I went so far as to try to buz at mom's head. The result was quite a few angry whacks on my back which were very painful. I then gave up the efforts to jump and prance around like a calf, and engaged in happy speculation of the large quantity of sweet milk. I would insist on claiming from mother and I expressed my expectations in this matter to mom and warned her angrily that I ought not to be given anything less than that. I said all this to mom, when grandma and dad were around so that they should also know what was very much on my mind.

My mom was very much happy about the turn events were taking and she would ask dad in grandma'a presence whether Soni would yield milk that would fill to the brim the big thick and narrow necked pot, we had for milking.

Dad would eat a piece of one of the raw sweet potatoes which were stored in the kitchen and observe, "Yes. She certainly would if she is fed nourishing feed."

Grandma with her long experience had her own reservations in the matter. So she said, "I hope so. Let us see."

She didn't like to express the misgivings and tempt misfortune. Moreover if the cow had given plenty of milk, she could have distributed more butter milk to the poor women in the village. This would have added to her merit in the account book of Chitragupta the divine accountant.

My mom was very assertive. "Well! Soni is ill tempered no doubt but very often, such ill tempered animals give a lot of milk."

This annoyed aunt, who shared uncle's misgiving as a devoted Hindu wife should and said, "One thing is certain. She is a very ill tempered

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cow and likely to be nasty in every thing she does including yielding milk. In any case, I am not sure it will be easy to milk her. She may administer nasty kicks to anybody who would try to milk her.

Dad wouldn't enter into an argument with aunt in this matter. Men in the family were expected to ignore such kitchen talk in a dignified manner, particularly when it came from the wives of other members of the joint family. So he went out carrying with him the sweet potato, he was eating. I would follow him out in an equally dignified and supercillious manner.

At last after making us wait for nearly half a month beyond her due date, Soni calved. But in keeping with her nasty nature, she chose a Saturday to do so. Saturday is the day of 'Shani' the deity who generally brought misfortune. This upset particularly the women in the family, who were always prone to express their feelings in the matter. Grandma frankly expressed her misgiving and cried, "Oh, she has lived up to the nasty nature and of all the days in the week, she had to calve on the most inauspicious day of the week. Couldn't she have waited for a day and calved on a Sunday, which is an auspicious day. Now to keep her in the cowshed may bring misfortune. The proper thing would be to sell her off. But after all she is a cow born in our own cowshed, and the only one at that. Well! The least we can do is to invite our family priest and ask him to chant the Sanskrit prayers to appease God Shani.

What made matters worse was that the calf was a cow and not a bullock.

It was only my ignorant aunt, who had been brought up in a town, who was happy that the calf was a cow, that would eventually add to the milk supply in the kitchen.

My dad was optimistic as ever. He said, "It is good that the first calf should be a cow. It will ensure adequate milk supply for the kitchen in the years to come." He then felt with his hands Soni's udders to find out how thick they were so as to gauge the milk they would yield.

Soni was licking her calf. She was also eating the nourishing and delicious feed she was given in a big iron container.

Grandma had a long experience of cows calving and she was advising on the feed that Soni was to be given and the care that had to be taken of her and her calf. Our cowherd Yeshya was partially running around carrying out the instructions given by various persons in the family. He cleaned the milk pot till it shined.

Grandma asked her daughter-in-law to wash the brass container in which Soni was to be milked. It was to be spruced clean and dry.

My mom rushed to do this and washed a bigger container than what grandma had instructed to do.

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Uncle took that container and went to the cow to milk the cow. He was particularly good, at milking cattle. My dad noticed him, proceeding to the cowshed and followed him there and said, "Don't milk her in the stale stuffy atmosphere of the cowshed. Do it in the fresh cool air of our backyard. That will put the cow in a happy mood.

Grandma was against this. She said, "Don't milk the cow in the open, where people can see her being milked and feel envious."

She then told the story of how the cow in her mother's house was milked in the open and how the evil envious eyes of neighbours had turned the fresh milk into mottled blood.

But dad was adamant. He said, "Nonsense. Nobody's evil eye will do any harm here. Oh! These old beliefs and misgivings! Let us say good bye to them."

This greatly added to my respect for dad. My mom gave him an admiring look.

Uncle yielded with poor grace. For he had great affection for my dad, his brother. Yeshya then brought the new born calf, which could hardly stand on its legs and walk. Soni followed her calf with affectionate lows. She was very proud that she had calved and given birth to a little calf and she was not happy that Yeshya our cowherd was carrying it. So when Yeshya placed the little calf in front of her, she began to lick it clean and dry with her rough tongue.

Yeshya then brought a big helping of special feed for her and she began to devour it in large mouthfuls with relish. Seeing the relish with which she was devouring it with big gulps I put a little bit of it in my mouth. Well! It wasn't at all tasty to my tongue.

Grandma didn't like that the cow should be milked in the open. So she quietly retired to the kitchen. But she was none the less very keen to see the cow being milked.

When the cow was tethered to the trunk of a big strong tree at the edge of the backyard, Yeshya brought out a big pot full of her favourite feed for her and she began to devour it in big gulps with relish. Dad then asked that the calf should be released to suck the taught udders. But the little calf was very foolish and could not quite locate the udders and did not quite know how to suck them. That made me laugh but I restrained myself in view of the solemnity of the occasion.

Yeshya tried to help the calf by catching hold of an udder and pushing it in its silly mouth. But the moment Yeshya's hand touched her udder, Soni jumped and kicked at Yeshya. It not only hit Yeshya but also the stupid little calf.

My Mom and aunt had slowly stepped out of the lobby of the

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house facing the backyard. But when they saw Soni kicking wildly they stepped back into the lobby in a hurry.

Uncle who had stepped out with the big narrow necked containers to milk the cow too stopped and decided to be cautious. He was obviously annoyed with the cow and did not seem to relish the prospect of milking her.

I was standing close by to watch Soni being milked and the strings of milk falling into the narrow necked pot held expertly between the two knees by my uncle. He gave me an annoyed look and said to me, "Why are you hovering around here? Go back in the house. The cow is pretty nervous as it is. And if you children crowd around her, she will become more edgy."

Uncle then boldly advanced towards the cow to uphold his renoun of being very skilled in milking cows.

My aunt did not like the prospect of uncle being kicked in the face, as he tried to milk the ill-tempered cow. She cried, "You would better not milk her. She is a nasty cow. Let Yeshya milk her. After all he has tended her since she was a calf."

Yeshya was keen to have a go at this hazardous task. He had almost lived with cattle since he was a toddler. So he was not afraid. He said to my uncle, "Give me the pot. I will milk her. She is used to me and I am familiar with her temper and habbits."

Uncle did not want to acknowledge that he was no longer confident that he could handle the hazardous task of milking the cow. He said to Yeshya, "Pull away the calf, after it has had enough milk. I will then milk the cow."

Auntie was scared and annoyed. She said, "Oh! Why must you be so stubborn. It was only the other day that the nasty cow almost gored you. Let Yeshya handle this task."

"Will you stop nagging me," cried uncle with a frown on his brow.

"Oh well! I would better go in the kitchen and not see what is happening. "She pouted with annoyance and went inside the house. She angrily summoned my little cousin who was also watching with interest the exciting episode. She made him lie down next to her and made him shut his eyes very much against his will.

My mom therefore felt that it was also incumbent on her to admonish her child. She said to me, "And why are you meddling in these hazardous going on? Come here and stay close to me." Their children were the only persons that daughter-in-law could scold in the family.

I stubbornly refused to obey my mother and got prepared to get

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an angry slap on my cheek, which I got hold of me. But that would be later.

By this time the calf had learnt to suck Soni's udder and was no longer afraid of being kicked by its mother.

Dad said, "I think she is now ready to be milked and the calf has had enough milk. I don't think she will kick if we tried to milk her."

Uncle was not convinced that Soni was ready to be milked. He said, "I think she is not quite ready to be milked yet. Let the calf suck her udders a little longer."

Dad said, "Give me the pot. I will milk her."

He was always an optimist and in a hurry.

Uncle did not want to be shown to be a coward. He advanced and after the calf was pulled away by Yeshya gingerly touched Soni's udders. Soni suddenly got nervous and stood tensely. Uncle waited for a little while and then gently sqeezed one udder. When he touched the udder, Soni jumped in the air and let loose an avalanche of kicks. The pot used for milking got a big dent and was kicked out of uncle's hands. Another kick hit uncle sharply on his upper arm. He was in considerable pain and stood up holding tightly his hurt arm cried "Oh what a terrible nasty cow she is. I have not seen a more nasty cow in my whole life."

Aunt rushed out and said in an angry tearful voice, "So, what I feared has happened. I wonder why nobody ever listens to me." She obviously had a lot on her mind and wanted to say more. But when she saw how angry uncle was with her for being right, she stopped short and disappeared in the kitchen.

My dad, ever the optimist, picked up the pot in which Soni was to be milked and moved forward to milk her. He said, "What does she mean by refusing to be milked. We have brought her up and given her the best available feed. She should have at least an iota of gratefulness for all that we have done for her."

My uncle warned him. "Better be careful. Her hoofs can break bones. I was unwittingly moving forward. Mother admonished me and cried "Why are you meddling there? Do you want to get hurt and add to my woes."

My father with his usual optimism and confidence caught hold of one of Soni's udder.

Soni immediately unlashed a storm of kicks. Dad, however, was careful after seeing what had happened to poor uncle and escaped being hurt. He was, however not willing to give up and again gingerly reached

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for the udders and Soni again almost flew in the air as she unleashed another avalanche of kicks.

Yeshya was familiar with the character traits of the cattle in our Konkan. He said, "She will never let herself be milked this way. We will have to tie her hind feet and also administer a few whacks on her back."

Dad being kindhearted as ever would not initially accept this inhuman suggestion. But eventually he agreed to accept the suggestion after having experienced not fully but a little bit the sharpness and hardness of Soni's hooves. So Yeshya brought a strong rope and tied her legs so tightly that she could barely stand. He moreover tied her firmly to the big strong wooden pillars of our cowshed. Soni now was unable to unleash the shower of her kicks. But she could stubbornly refuse to yield any milk, which she did. So various efforts were made to make her release milk from her udders. My grandma made the usual offering to Gods to seek their blessings and undo the effects of envious eyes on Soni. Soni was given another big helping of her favourite feed, which she promptly gobbled and lowed to ask for more of it. My dad rubbed affectionately her long neck and she very happily raised it and asked to be rubbed more and affectionately licked with her prickly tongue dad's hand. She allowed the calf to suckle. But when dad tried to milk her, not a drop came out of her udders.

Yeshya said, "The cattle and particularly the cows in our Konkan are very cranky and contrary. If she is administered sharp blows, she will come round and start yielding milk."

Uncle who was not at all happy with the cow but still could not bring himself to accept the idea of whacking a newly calved cow. He said, "Oh no. Don't whack her. After all she has calved only today."

Grandma said the same thing. "Oh no, don't do that. She is the first calf born in this house of ours. It doesn't matter it she does not yield milk today. She will do so tomorrow and for many more days to come."

But dad was quite annoyed with the nasty and perverse cow. He hit her hard several times with the thick cudgel he carried with him when he moved outdoors in our country farmland where one was likely to run into snakes and vicious cattle. So hard was she hit, that her back bent under the strokes and the surprise effect was that Soni, who was not yielding milk so far began to yield it. I actually saw and heard threads of milk falling into the milking pot.

I rushed forward to see what seemed to be a miracle and I eyed my dad respectfully while he was busy milking the cow. But this did

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not go on for any length of time, in spite of dad's vigorous efforts, the strings of milk stopped falling in the container and Yeshya cried, "Oh, goodness! That seem to be all the milk she had in her udders."

There was not even a drinking glass full of white milk in the big narrow necked pot, which Grandma had hope fully given for milking the cow.

Dad pursed his lips, looked at uncle and nodded and uncle too gave him an equally disappointed look.

Yeshya could not help bursting into laughter. He gave the pot to Grandma and cried, "Grandma here is your cow's milk."

Grandma peered into the pot and not being able to see any milk with her weak eyes, dipped her fingers in it. The fingers did not reach the milk. She dipped the palm of her hand and at last it found some milk at the very bottom of the pot.

She cried, "My goodness! Is this cow's milk or the milk of a cat."

This was the end of all my dreams of eating nice sweet Kharwas made from the first few day's raw milk of a newly calved cow.

But Soni seemed to be happy over the milk she had yielded and lowed over and over again to demand more of the delicious feed, she liked and which she felt she had rightfully earned.

Translated from Marathi by the Author

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Cities on the Shore of the Ocean

Himanshu Joshi

Yes, that day too, some wisps of shredded cotton were scattered in the clear, blue sky—floating gently in the air. The chilly sunshine felt sweet, good. Everything around felt good. Clean, washed! Open and full of enchantment!

I was gazing at this new world, full of wonder.

I don't know how, lost in talk, we had wandered so far! Yesterday Ingrid told me that in the evening, after wandering for a while on Caljuhan road they had set off in the direction of Sogsawan Lake—Nora, Ina and Rolf. The place was full of wild strawberry bushes. They had their fill of the sweet-sour strawberries and didn't forget to bring some back for their friends too.

She had held out a small brown bag to me and when instead of thanks I said, "*Thuzan thuk*," in Norwegian, all of them burst out laughing.

I don't know why I felt that you didn't like this. When I offered the open bag to you, just to be polite, you picked up a small strawberry to taste, and returned the rest.

"Strawberries are not always so sweet..." Ina was saying when Ole Peter cut her short, "The touch of Nora's slender, delicate fingers must have sweetened them." Laughter swelled again, sounding like numerous loose coins suddenly scattered on a stone floor.

Nora clapped and laughed for a long time.

This deserted end of the lake appealed—because of its unspoilt beauty. Such greenery, such a clean blue sky, such clear water, so much bright, washed light. Spellbound, we moved on impulsively. When we had walked for a while, our tired feet searched for a resting place.

You said, chirruping like a little girl, "Oh! Oh, that corner! Next to the crooked birch tree...in front of that big white rock..."

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There were rugs of soft green grass spread out. How wonderful it felt walking on that spongy sward—a tender, joyous sensation!

In the midst of the greenery, at the edge of the lake, a rough white rock reclined like the back of an elephant. Three sides were immersed in the water.

"Let's sit here," I said, as if talking to myself.

When you said, "The water's very deep..." I looked at you and said playfully, "All the better. It'll be easier to drown."

In response, you kept quiet. I noticed—you were pressing your silken lower lip with your teeth. You were staring at me unblinking; your round marble-like blue eyes roving like those of a cat about to spring.

When I stroked your scattered golden hair gently, suddenly you smiled.

Holding each other's hands for support, when we jumped carefully on to the rock and sat down, I gazed astonished at the scene around. A green forest of birch and deodar had spread its arms as far as the eye could see! Trees that touched the sky, countless rays of the chilly sun sifted through them to shimmer in the water. The silent water gleamed like mercury in some places, while the sun's rays sprang like white sparks when they touched it.

Many trees had descended into the water to bathe, floating along with their leaves and branches, turning the green water greener still. Beneath the trees, their mirror images. The azure sky's cerulean reflection. Slender branches shaking in the wind, sharp needle-thin leaves shivering. It seemed as if the sky, earth and water were different dimensions of the same picture...no, the same dimension, but the reflected images of a multiplicity of pictures.

On the right, on the slope of a hill, some colourful shadows were flitting like butterflies. That constrained, quiet noise was overpowering in this silence. Little by little the sounds closed up—sounds like laughter and talk. Perhaps some children were picking wild strawberries. Perhaps they were singing in high, unrestrained voices. It was a screaming sound like a guitar playing—fragmented! An off key instrument!

At that very moment you gently threw a stone in the water and a ring began to stretch out on its own. Who knows what kind of search you were embarking on, when you peered into the mirror of that continuously growing circle.

Because of the light shimmering in the water, numerous forms were taking shape, shapes like the cast-off skins of snakes.

Wary of getting wet, I rolled up my right sleeve slightly. When I put my fingers in the water, waving them about, its icy chill stung like a scorpion bite.

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"Oh!" I immediately removed my hand.

"Why, what happened?" you asked, looking at me wonderingly.

"It looks as if there are lots of water snakes in the lake. I think one of them has bitten me."

"Well, it must have been a female. It must have found your blood sweet." You looked at me roguishly.

I got a little annoyed.

"Shall I cut my finger, will you taste it?"

I hadn't finished speaking when you chirped, "Am I a snake?"

"You're not a snake, but a fairy, a water nymph. Cleopatra of Egypt." Your eloquent eyes began to sparkle. As if they were smiling.

True, I was talking to you, but thousands of questions hung on my eyelids. My gaze roamed all over, searching for something, even as I was speaking to you.

"What are you looking for?"

"I'm hunting for the other corner of the lake. I'll look for a few more. And finally I'll find one from which all the corners of this lake are visible..."

"And what'll happen then?"

"Then what shouldn't, will happen..."

"You mean?"

I was quiet for a few moments. Then breaking the silence, I said, "In my country, rather, in a mountainous area of my country, there are many lakes. One of them is called Naukuchia Lake. In other words, a lake with nine corners. It is said, anyone who catches sight of all nine corners from the same spot will either become a king or die."

Perhaps you didn't like what I said. Without coming up with some deep, philosophical response, you said casually, "Kings are not in vogue any more. And as for the other possibility, you're welcome to go. Look for ten, not nine corners. I'll sit here waiting for you till judgement day."

"Tchch! You didn't understand. I don't want to die or become a king myself. I just want to turn you into Cleopatra—the Empress of Egypt."

You suddenly burst out laughing.

"So, will you hand over the whole of Egypt to me? What will poor Hosni Mubarak do?" You continued, thoughtfully, "You don't know much about Cleopatra. She was a very spirited soul. You wouldn't be able to take it..."

Fine strands of tall grass had shot up to the level of the rock. I plucked one or two mechanically, divided them into bits and began to throw them into the water. They floated on the placid surface of the lake.

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For a while there was silence between us. Perhaps you too were counting the trees looming before us.

Then like an impish child, you flung another stone in the water, in the same way.

A silver-coloured fish sprang out of the rock, slipped into the water and disappeared.

"How many more stones do you have?" I asked. You rubbed your palms to dust off the mud and said, "That was all. No more."

I continued to chew on the damp blades of grass, kept pulling them apart and throwing them into the water, lost in thought.

"Well, Bahira, have you ever seen snow on the mountains?"

"No."

"Does it snow in Cairo?"

"Not really."

"It falls in the mountainous regions of our country. We have the high Himalayas there..." I turned silent.

"What do you want to say?"

"I was telling you about the fishes..."

"But you were talking about snow."

"You're right but I'm not wrong either. I wanted to say something about both." I looked at you and said, "You may not consider this to be true, but fish swept along by snow fed rivers from the mountains into the plains, sometimes melt like wax in the scorching heat and dissolve in the water."

You burst out laughing. "Impossible! That cannot be true. I've never heard anything like that..."

You were gazing at me with that same expression of disbelief. Keeping your eyes fixed on me.

"It's very common. Doesn't it happen in your country? When you return, go to the mouth of the river Nile on a hot afternoon and you'll find a mass of melting fishes..."

You suddenly covered your satiny face with the colourful silk scarf, printed with a scene of the pyramids. You laughed so much that you became breathless. Oh God...!

Now I lay on my back on the huge rock and examined the tops of the deodar trees with apparent interest. The silky white clouds, which had divided themselves into fragments, floated lazily in the blue sky.

You too were silent. Who knows what you were searching for so curiously, in that enchanting scene, which you had gathered into your expressive blue eyes?

With an air of mystery, you tried to read the emotions that had

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scattered themselves in my eyes and whispered slowly, "You have beautiful eyes, you wicked fellow. They're fascinating enough to drive anyone mad."

Now it was my turn to be amused.

I exploded with laughter.

"Oh, I didn't know you composed poetry too."

"Why are you bringing poetry into this? Isn't the simple truth enough to describe something real? I'm not speaking in riddles here. I'm just narrating plainly what I felt, what I experienced. I can't talk like you..."

Then you spoke again, breaking the silence that lingered for a few moments. "I've forgotten everything after coming here. My past, my present, my own identity..." As you said this you became very emotional. "I couldn't ever have dreamt that the world could be so beautiful. The world that I had seen so far was my whole universe. That there was something beyond that, other horizons, was far removed from my imagination."

Your slender, delicate fingers moved slowly, mechanically on my head, creating new circles, the heat of their vibration...the sensation of your breath.

My eyes began to close on their own. I felt as though, little by little I was losing consciousness. Then suddenly, two burning drops of dew fell on my forehead and I came awake. "Oh, you're crying, Bahira?"

It had been such a long time since I came to Norway but I hadn't yet been able to completely absorb my surroundings. It felt like a different world. Neither was day like the day I knew nor night like the night. A kind of brightness seemed to pervade each moment.

When the sun shone during the day it didn't feel like sunshine. It seemed to merely bear the colour of sunshine. A yellow light, but devoid of warmth.

In India one gets a sense of the season or whether it's day or night through the light outside. When it begins to grow dark one's steps turn homewards on their own. When it's morning, it means it's time to wake up. Time to settle into one's daily routine.

But not only the economics, the arithmetic of this place seemed different. Here, the vibrations of the needle of a clock measured time, not light or darkness.

When I told you what had happened the day before, you began to giggle like a little girl.

"Didn't you look at the clock?"

"I did. But I looked at the sun shining outside too..."

"Then..."

"Actually I had made a plan to meet an Indian friend at Maystua at eleven o'clock."

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I described the incident at length—

I was tired. Was lying in bed reading something. It was a little cold outside. God knows when my eyes closed, and I fell into a deep sleep. When I heard the phone ring, I woke up with a start. Then I looked at the clock and saw it was already ten. Even if I got ready as fast as I could it would be difficult to reach Maystua at eleven.

All the same I quickly got ready. Flung clothes on my body and hurried to get to the station. The wooden stairs creaked louder than ever, as I raced down. Suddenly the Yugoslavian watchman ran up to me. "Is everything OK?" he asked in his broken English.

"Everything's fine. I had fixed up to meet someone. I have to get there in time..."

"What time had you arranged to meet? During the day or night?"

"During the day!" I said.

In response he said, "But my dear sir, it's going to be eleven at night right now."

I gazed at him surprised. "What, it's night right now?"

There was pale sunlight outside, like there was during the day. Though there was not much activity, I could hear loud voices clearly. On the slope of the park opposite, people were enthusiastically demonstrating their closeness, without any restraint. This pleasant aspect of their culture might have appeared odd to us but it was perfectly normal here.

Some young couples were strolling on the tender green grass beneath some distant trees.

I didn't know what to do when I got back to my room. I had received some letters from India. I thought I might as well reply to them. But my pen just wouldn't move.

That day I'd bought some colourful picture post cards with beautiful scenes from Norway on them, while returning from the market. Scenes of the shining midnight sun. You had chosen all of them. Sledges moving through the snow—drawn by dogs and reindeer. Polar bears!

More than half were those you had selected but forgotten to take. Ever since I arrived, I had been longing for darkness. Darkness has its place in our lives, the way light has. I faced this truth for the first time, after coming here.

In the evening you said, at dinner time, "I called home just now and spoke to Abira. I told her, since we're close to the North Pole, the day is six months long here and the night six months too. At this time it's day..."

"Then how do people go to sleep there, with the sun shining? You'll fall sick in that environment," she said, worried.

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"Oh, they put thick curtains on the windows and doors. People get accustomed to the surroundings they live in. Isn't it?"

"That's true." When I said that you turned serious.

Then I remembered an incident that had occurred a long way back. Iwata Son had come to India to learn Hindi. He was staying in Delhi. It was summer, the season when the blisteringly hot 'loo' blows, something never experienced in Japan. He wrote to his mother that a scorching wind was blowing during that time, so hot that sometimes birds fainted and fell off the trees.

A few days later his mother sent him a frantic letter, saying, "I'm sending you a ticket. Return to Japan as soon as you can."

When I narrated this to you, you began to laugh. "If you had your way, you would send me back to Cairo by the next flight."

"Who could be a greater enemy of yours in this world than me?"

"Yes, that's absolutely true."

There were more than a hundred people there, from America, Britain, Nigeria, Japan, China, Israel, India and Egypt. They were to stay in this international institution for one and a half months. We had arrived on the twenty fourth of June. Three weeks had flown past without our realising how they had gone by.

"There's a plan to go for a trip to Kagrera day after tomorrow. Will you come?" you had asked, very affectionately.

"No, there's something I need to do, that is more important."

Perhaps you didn't expect such an indifferent response. You gazed at me, as though stunned into silence. Then you said with some acrimony, "Last week you didn't come to Yutin Hyman either. May I ask why you decided to come here? You can catch up with your reading back in India too."

Why I decided to come here, I didn't know myself. I wanted to say that but kept quiet.

After a few seconds I broke the silence, saying, "Next week we have to go to Telemark. I'll come along then."

You left in a huff, without a word in response.

I found you standing before me; bag in hand, on the third day after this incident.

"So early?"

"Yes, it is early! What are you dreaming about? Hurry up and get ready. The bus is waiting. It'll leave at 9.15. You know, in Norway a quarter past nine means exactly fifteen minutes past nine. Neither a second more, nor less."

You went on chattering and all the while you were stuffing my

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towel, brush, soap and other such objects into the empty bag that had hung on the peg in front of me.

"Are you crazy? I didn't put my name down for the trip. How can I...?"

"Don't worry. I went to the office and wrote it. What are you thinking about? Hurry up, you lazy..."

"Sometimes I feel that you are seized by fits of insanity. One never knows what you might do when!"

You scattered my things all around.

You flung my shoes and socks in front of me and said, "There are only four minutes left."

God knows when I put on my shoes, locked the door. When I leapt down the stairs. When we crossed the road and reached the crossing where the bus stood. The last announcement had already been made. There was a guide who was supposed to fill each moment of the way with his chatter.

The automatic door opened suddenly and we had barely stepped into the bus when its wheels began to turn. My eye fell on my watch and I saw that it was exactly 9.15.

"If we had been one minute late the bus would have left," you said, wiping the sweat that spurted on your face despite the cold. "I wouldn't be surprised if I had a heart attack, and all because of you."

You were furious but I was smiling playfully. "Well, at least that would prove that you possess something like a heart."

In response you smiled helplessly, and said nothing.

It took three and a half hours to reach Kagrera. You let me have the window seat.

"Why?"

You didn't speak, just gave me a look that said all.

The guide was speaking into his mike, telling us about the places we passed.

"This is the town of Drummon. It's one of Norway's important harbours. It was settled in the sixteenth century. There is a paper mill here."

We could see apple orchards nearby. At one place there was a board saying—'Horse Farm.'

"You said that back home you have horses, in your farmhouse. If you wish we could buy a couple of horses for you."

You smiled faintly at my tomfoolery, but didn't speak at all.

We never noticed when we passed the towns of Hocheson and Larvik. Now and again we glimpsed colourful ships riding at anchor,

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in some places a whole flotilla of diesel powered boats, swaying in the waves that kept battering the ocean shores. Large logs, lashed together floated about. From far, from very far it seemed as if somewhere in the incessantly blue water, mats/rivers were floating.

In some places you could see rows of vegetables growing in long, domed acrylic greenhouses, to save them from the cold and frost.

There were arrangements for food in Kragera and we were allowed a few moments to rest. But we neither ate nor rested.

We gazed all around awestruck, at the panorama—the host of little islands stretching on and on.

I strolled on far ahead all by myself. When I returned I got the impression that you were waiting for me.

"So you've seen all of Kragera? Did you leave anything out?" you remarked, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

I replied in the same vein, "I did leave something for others to see, but yes..." As if I'd suddenly remembered something, "A thought struck me. Let's buy two or three islands. They'll be dirt cheap."

"What'll you do with them?" you asked eagerly.

"Well you can make pyramids for these people. Norwegians don't have too many such monuments. They can use them to attract tourists and earn their living."

Everyone laughed at this.

Lara, who was from Brazil, said, "Why don't you construct a Taj Mahal?"

"For that you'll have to die first. It has to be a monument in your memory!"

They all cracked up again.

To cap my comments, Kim Jong from Korea said, sounding concerned, "But from where will you get mummies to put in the pyramids?"

Someone said, pointing towards the elderly Romanian Vionova, "She probably will be of use some day!"

Everybody burst into loud laughter.

The islands of Kragera accompanied us for quite some time. Some were quite large but others so small that children could have raced from one end to the other quite easily.

You stayed by my side like a shadow, dumbly gathering the scene into your dreamy blue eyes, your gaze full of wonder.

Now we had to walk to the island that lay before us and climb up the lighthouse to get a view of the magnificent vista. This was the southernmost point in Norway, the very last extremity.

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A large number of ships were cutting through the enormous waves of the ocean, travelling south to become smaller and smaller and finally disappear. Others turned their faces eastward and faded away.

Suddenly something occurred to me. Gazing at you, I asked, "You've heard of the Gulf Stream?"

You looked puzzled and seemed lost in thought for a while. "I've definitely heard of the Gulf countries—but no, not the Gulf Stream."

"You really are something, Bahira..." Then I composed myself and continued in a calmer tone, "Close to where we are standing, in the ocean, there is a huge current of warm water, which keeps flowing constantly towards the icy lands of the north. Because of the warmth of this current the shores of Norway do not freeze in winter. This permits free movement throughout the year. Isn't it amazing?"

When I laughed, you too, responded, with your pure, guileless laughter.

How many emotions made an appearance all at once, in your transparent eyes, coming and going, like sunshine and shadow.

The whole island was covered with large white stones, smooth and rounded. I picked up a small one and said, "They must have rolled here hundreds and thousands of years ago in the Ice Age. Swept along by the glaciers. See, how smooth they've become!"

You took the stone in your hand and gazed at it unblinking. Then you gently gave it back.

When we walked ahead, I noticed—you had selected two smooth and pretty pebbles from that heap and put them in your purse.

I kept wondering, what would you do with those stones? Would you take them with you to Cairo? Would you display them in your drawing room? Present them to a close friend as a souvenir from Norway? Or would you take them as a gift for your two children or keep them hidden somewhere as a memento of this trip? Some time...

We were walking along silently. As if turning into a heap of stones ourselves. How different the landscape seemed here, from what we glimpsed from the top of the lighthouse!

"Isn't happenstance another name for life itself?" It was as if you were asking yourself, while addressing me. "It's quite likely that we'll never view these sights again in this life..."

We were progressing, slowly and mechanically towards the point where our travelling companions stood chatting. They began to pick up their bags in their hands or sling them on their shoulders.

"They're waiting for us, perhaps. There are only five minutes left for the bus to leave."

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Our feet moved faster. The others formed a queue and began to board the bus.

Blown about by the breeze, the Israeli Nora's hair began to gleam even brighter, touched by the golden rays of the sun.

All the others began to seat themselves in the same places they'd occupied earlier.

When I saved the window seat for you, you refused it, shaking your head.

"When we went to Thoyan yesterday, you said in the train that you find the window seat more convenient."

"That was in the train..."

I understood your feelings perfectly. Why you were saying that, for what reasons, even the deeper sentiments behind it.

I began to search in the shifting scene outside the window for the equivalent of that which was taking place within me, in a different form. Little images were acquiring new dimensions. Like a curious child you were trying to carefully store away all that seemed beyond your understanding.

Such a large country! Such a small population! How did people pass their lives in these desolate islands? Particularly in winter, when it must all seem even more deserted and isolated.

Quite likely, the national flag hanging in front of each house acted as a landmark, so that a newcomer who got lost could get his bearings easily.

As we crossed mountains, far spread forests, rivers, waterfalls one by one, it was hard to estimate where we were going—in which direction.

Last night's events roamed my mind still. The air had been festive. People sang songs from their countries. Shared interesting titbits. Some played musical instruments. The atmosphere brimmed with enthusiasm. You had sung an Egyptian folk song. The audience listened, spellbound. You translated it for us into English, "Fish dwell not only in the sea or rivers, but also in the burning sands of the Sahara. Stars shine on the earth too. When you live on in my memories, how can you ever die? You exist without being present. Yes, in my breath, in the air, like a fragrance, you are everywhere."

Later, while introducing you, the rector of the institution Prof. Flatine mentioned, "You were listening to a song sung by the well-known Egyptian folk singer Bahira Shafeek."

Though I had known you well for such a long time, this piece of information was new to me and very delightful.

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For a long time, I gazed at you mesmerized, you had an exceptionally melodious voice.

"Why is it," you had said, looking at me, breaking the silence, "that the further we move away from our own land the closer it feels? Why have those pyramids that seemed mere heaps of stone there, acquired a different identity here, aroused new sentiments? Why do they seem to belong much more to me? Why does the water of the Nile seem clearer, purer? The feeling of holding nectar in my cupped hands..."

Somewhere inside, you had become very emotional.

While you were saying this, I recalled the rivers of my own country which were turning into filthy drains and dying...

I changed the subject and asked, "Where did you study music?"

"I've just practised a little. In the entire course of my existence, I have never been able to find time to relax, to simply sit and unwind." You said this as if you were searching in a vacuum, as if you were telling yourself something.

"When your husband is so well employed, is connected with such an important institute in Cairo, why do you wear yourself out working day and night? You were telling someone that day that you've never found such solace and peace as you have here."

You were silent for a long time, plumbing some inner depth. Then you peered out of the window and said, "All of us carry our own crosses on our shoulders. To bear them, to continue bearing them till our last breath, that's our fate. Don't you feel that way?"

I remained silent. You were quiet too. There was no sound other than that of movement of the bus. No horns were heard either. To blow a horn here is considered the equivalent of the rudest abuse. Very strange.

"My husband lives separately, with his other wife." Your sinking voice seemed to be coming from inside a well. "I have two children—Abira and Sahil. Whatever my life might be, I exist, but I have only one wish, to help them achieve something. Abira wants to be a doctor and Sahil an engineer..."

You extended your hand, showing me a silvery bracelet on your wrist. 'Abira' was written on it in the Roman script.

"It was Abira who called day before yesterday at night. She was saying that it snows a lot in Norway. Don't go out in the open at night. Last time when you went to Algeria, how ill you were when you returned!"

"The children are very loving. They take such good care of me. Sahil says, 'I'll get through in the very first entrance exam, Mummy! I'll

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build a big house for you in Cairo when I become an engineer. We won't live in Luxor then...' "

Your words appealed to me greatly. How early such children mature, who have to face difficult circumstances!

"The bus will stop for only fifteen minutes here. There are arrangements for tea and light snacks. We will set off for our final destination at a quarter past five." After this announcement, the bus suddenly came to a halt. A circular platform had been built here. One could get a view of the magnificent vista surrounding us from it.

Hills behind hills. And hills behind them. Several layers of hills glimpsed together, which shaded into a faint blue and at some point, became one with the horizon. The way the azure softly faded away, made it all appear like a painting.

You had already taken out your camera and captured some scenes without my realising. Then you held it out to Joseph, who was from Ghana, and said, "Please, a picture of the two of us together..."

Joseph took two photos.

"I'll send them as soon as I reach Cairo." It seemed to me that you said that just for the sake of saying it.

The sunlight was paling.

The wheels of the bus were turning again. Most of the people held white plastic glasses full of hot tea in their hands. They were sipping it while savouring the scenes outside.

Someone put on a cassette of Japanese music. Apart from the two or three Japanese in the group, none of us could understand what the singer was belting out in a shrill voice.

We could see groups of sheep by the wayside here too. With long shaggy coats. Rounded horns.

"Do these sheep just wander around on their own?" you asked. "I can't see a shepherd accompanying them?"

"Yes, they don't have shepherds here. The sheep roam about independently in the woods."

"But lions, tigers or some other fierce animals..." you said, looking at me with the naively, like an innocent child.

I couldn't help laughing at your naiveté.

"There are no lions or tigers in these forests. Of course, sometimes hyenas or wolves that have fled from forests from neighbouring countries can be seen...for two or three months these sheep live on their own

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in the forests. Then when the time comes, their owners herd them back into their folds."

It was evening when we reached Telemark. Not evening the way we know it. A kind of diffused light spread itself like a fog.

We were to spend the night there. So one by one, we all got down with our luggage. Rooms had been booked in the guesthouse.

After a wash and change, the whole group began to gather around the dining table.

"In Norway people have their dinner so early that sometimes one begins to feel hungry at night," you said, wrapping a red and yellow silk scarf around your neck.

"You can pack something for a snack at night, the way other people from African-Asian countries pick up sandwiches, bottles of milk or fruit from the kitchen. The market is pretty far from Willindren."

People were forming groups to go out sight seeing. Norma came to call you, but you said you had other plans.

"Do you intend to just sit here? Let's go and visit some place nearby!" Your voice sounded heavy, weighted.

I was tired, didn't feel like going out.

Then Norma came and laughingly caught hold of your hand and took you away. I saw that Alma too was standing there close by. You had to go, though you had no inclination for it.

Norma was your roommate. She had plans to visit Egypt the following year on some project. For this reason she was taking advantage of your presence to gather as much information as she could.

It was no use just lounging around. So I took out some newspapers from my bag and began to read them. Because I was returning to India via England, I had to make arrangements for my stay in London beforehand.

Some lines of national news, some from the provinces. It surprised me that there was no space, even marginally so, for news from India or other third world countries in Norwegian newspapers.

I put the papers away and went out. Where was I to go? What should I do? It was hard to decide.

With my sweater flung over my shoulder, I wandered around aimlessly and landed up somewhere quite far.

When I glanced down from the top of the hill that was as flat as an elephant's back, there was something frightening about the sight.

The river lay there like a serpent. There was something else there that had the look of a tiger. Perhaps it was the powerhouse.

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I lay down on my back in the shade of the dense fir trees and gazed at the clear sky, searching for God knows what.

That day when we were returning from Aker Bregge, I found you strolling around alone near Churchill's statue.

"I had come here to find out about my plane ticket," you had said.

We had gone back by train to Billingdren.

Soft green grass carpeted the slope in front of the guesthouse. A few benches, here and there. We sat down quietly.

Yes, you were telling me something about yourself, in detail, "We stay at Luxor which is close to Cairo. We have our ancestral house there. Do visit us if you ever come to Egypt. I can show you the whole of Cairo in just two or three days." You paused for a while and said, "The pyramids are very close to Luxor. It's worth seeing them. You'll enjoy it..."

It seemed as if you became a little emotional while saying this.

"Like men, women too are known by their father's surname in our country, not their husband's. It feels a little odd when you address me as Mrs. Shafique. Shafique is not my husband's but my father's name..."

When you looked at me smilingly I felt a little embarrassed. "I have been calling you by this name all the time."

The expatriate Indians, who were my friends in Norway, had all become your friends too.

Just then the sound of some people talking and laughing close by startled me.

What did I see—you were standing there along with Norma, Ginny and Arne.

Arne was of Norwegian origin but settled in Canada. Being of Norwegian origin, he cannot pronounce the word 'Joshi' correctly sometimes and says 'Yoshi'. I can't help laughing and he immediately gets embarrassed. Yesterday he was calling 'Chawla' 'Sawla'.

We stood there and chatted for a while.

The sight before us was terrifying. Turn by turn, we gazed down at the deep valley, which seemed sunk in the nether world or at the snowy mountains touching the sky.

Arne said, "Tomorrow morning the bus will take us down into this valley first and then we will touch the top of this snow capped mountain. You'll be amazed to hear that while digging this mountain, ice that was hundreds and thousand of years old was unearthed."

They begged you to sing a song, but you waved their pleas aside. Arne had to play the guitar. It was time to depart so they all left.

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In the end I realised I was the only one left—all alone.

All sorts of thoughts passed through my mind, Egypt, India and ice that was hundreds and thousands of years old, and Kagrera.

Then your voice shattered my reverie. When I looked up astonished—you stood there laughing, like a statue.

"Don't you want to go home? Do you want to spend the night here?"

"Do they have anything like night here?" I said, after some thought. "And what do I have to do there, in that clamour. It feels so good here, the atmosphere's so open, so quiet. Come, sit down..."

You sat down like an obedient child.

"You haven't got a letter from home recently?"

"I got one from Abira. Sahil called yesterday."

"Aren't you longing to go home?"

You continued to gaze at me mutely.

I kept lying on the grass like that. A moon rose above the snow capped peaks, like a sandalwood tika. Its icy-cold, silky rays were scattering like a fog. The river gleamed like a streak of mercury.

The faint, pain filled, melody of your humming surged and ebbed through the deserted, silent air. Like the deeply felt sensation of a smouldering ache.

I don't know how long I lay there, inert.

And you kept searching for who knows what in the void, with your sad eyes.

We barely noticed how soon the days passed.

There were so many things to preoccupy us on our return to Oslo.

One day Harry came along in a great hurry. He said, "We're making a plan to go to Tramso. Would you like to come?"

"Tramso...you mean—" I asked, after some thought.

"Inside the Arctic circle, till the town of Tramso. Possibly right up to the border— Finmark in other words. Boats don't go ahead of that. The boundary of Sweden begins there."

"But as a New Zealander won't the Antarctic Circle be closer for you?" He burst out laughing when I said that.

When Harry, Nora, Mona and a few other friends left one day, it felt as if the whole lively group had disintegrated.

That evening you came in such a rush that you were practically panting. "What are you doing sitting here? The Mexicans have organised a musical evening."

I didn't respond to that. I was absorbed in my book. You snatched it from my hands.

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"Vikings..." you said, making a face. "You can read this pirate tale later."

There was a sense of urgency in your words. I said calmly, "Sit down for a while. Hundreds of years ago many of these Norwegian pirates went and settled in England. There is a good percentage of their stock in the present British population."

A little surprised, you began to laugh. "Why are you bothering yourself with all that? And yes, I forgot to tell you. I called Abira this evening. She said that Sahil had got admission in the engineering college. I was a little worried about how he would fare. Abira's very level-headed. She'll complete her medical studies in two or three years."

I said, with a laugh, "What good news! You should give us a treat, throw a party."

You handed me your purse quietly, saying, "Just leave a few dollars for taxi fare for when I reach Cairo. All the rest is yours. Spend it however you wish."

For a long time the purse cowered in my hands like a frightened bird. Then I returned it, saying, "Keep it. I'll throw the party."

You clapped and said, "Ah, that's very brave. We'll celebrate this weekend."

But before we could do that some other plans cropped up.

"Harry, Mona and all have gone on a trip to Tramso. I didn't know or we could have gone too," you said, as we strolled on the lawn after dinner.

"If you are that keen to die you don't need to go that far. We can find some easier way here."

When I said that, you flared up. "Did all the people who went there earlier, go just to die?"

"They know better about themselves, but I can put it down in writing that you won't return in one piece."

A number of circles were drawn on the calendar hanging in your room. You would ring each date with a red pencil, once it had passed. Only a few dates were left unmarked.

That day, I was sitting in my room working, when the phone rang. "Bahira speaking. Some more of our companions are going to Tramso tomorrow morning. I've booked two seats along with them, through Saga Travels. Get ready. I'm coming over in a little while."

You put down the phone hurriedly.

I was taken aback!

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What a strange, crazy girl! It was not easy to reach that inaccessible region without preparing yourself properly. People who suffered from high blood pressure had to be particularly careful. She should have asked me at least, before making those plans.

After a while you arrived, panting. You had large paper bags in both your hands. You dumped them on the sofa and began to wipe your brow.

I looked a little stern.

"Sorry," you said, and began to laugh.

"I didn't want to go to Telemark, and you too were not prepared to. But when we went, we enjoyed it. This excursion to Tramso will be good fun too." You came and sat down close to me. "In any case we have to leave on the sixteenth. This is an opportunity, the very last opportunity. Who knows if we'll meet again in this lifetime? So don't make a face. Get ready..."

I felt a little ashamed. If I had to go I might as well go with good grace. Nothing should happen that I might regret somewhere, some time later.

I noticed that you were quietly packing my things in my bag.

"Your socks will be dry by the time we leave."

You had washed them and hung them in the bathroom.

You'd bought a few things that we might need for the journey.

We met several of our acquaintances at the station.

The moment she set eyes on you, Norma came and hugged you.

"You didn't tell me!" she complained and you replied with a list of all the things that had kept you busy.

Lemer Sylvia from Germany, Luskakhov, the Russian and the Brazilian Carlos were standing close by. Carlos was a good singer. He had studied in Cairo for some time. You had come to know him quite well. You stood there chatting with him for quite a while.

There were many vacant seats.

When the train set off you came and sat on the window seat opposite. The day before, you had bought an English guidebook from the market. You began tracing the route we were to take. In between your eyes kept wandering towards our luggage that was placed near the door, at some distance.

There were open shelves for passengers to place their luggage close to the door. People would leave their stuff there and sit in their berths.

"How far will this train go?" you asked, pensively.

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"Till Bodø, which is close to Lodingen. That's the last station."

"When will we get there?"

"At eleven, tomorrow morning." I had the timetable with me, the guidebook as well. They contained all the necessary information in full detail.

"I was asking because," you said, "our baggage will lie there unprotected all night. Passengers get on and off at each station. If someone steals something..."

"Ssh!" I put a finger on my lips. "Speak softly! People don't steal here, the way we do. You can sleep without a care. We'll take all our luggage down at Lodingen." You were gazing at me astonished, doubtful, filled with disbelief. Your eyes gleamed more than ever.

We had to change trains at Tranheim. It was half past ten at night when we were done. You bought some more solo, chips and other eatables.

"Are you planning to set up a shop?" I guffawed.

You replied in the same tone, "Yes!"

"In Norway or Cairo...?"

"Both!" Everyone laughed.

Cutting through inaccessible mountains, the train hurtled ahead. There were countless rows of hills. Tunnels through them. Tunnels and tunnels.

"Our trains don't go so fast even in the plains," you said, looking out curiously.

You saw herds of reindeer for the first time in your life.

"Why is there a wooden fence along the railway track?"

"So that the herds of reindeer don't collide with the trains!" Raya replied. She was from Russia. Such scenes, such an environment was to be found in the snowbound areas of Russia too, she said.

Snow covered mountains! Dense forests! Fjords! A faint light, or a slight sensation of darkness.

The train kept running on and on headlong, amidst that desolation.

The travellers were trying to sleep—some were nodding in their seats. I dozed off a couple of times too, but your eyes were fixed on the landscape outside, spellbound.

Then God knows when, my eyes shut by themselves, and I fell asleep.

When I awoke with a start, I noticed that all our fellow travellers were in the grip of a deep slumber. You too, were fast asleep.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was three o'clock. When I peered out of the window, I was transfixed.

Multicoloured lights were rising like a mist and floating in the sky. One after another, like waves.

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When I woke you up, you were sleeping soundly. You came awake with a start. I gestured to you to look outside, so as not to disturb the others.

You rubbed your eyes and tried to take in the view. "Oh, what is this? Where are we?"

There was a view of a harbour. A board said, Moyzen Fjord.

"These coloured clouds."

"They are known as the Aurora Borealis. You can see such lights in the polar regions," I said.

It seemed as if the train had come out of the tunnel and was racing on the plateau on the back of the hill, as if it were eager to climb up into the sky.

Then suddenly the train stopped and came to a complete standstill. There was an announcement, "Now you are entering the polar circle. Welcome to the Arctic region."

The passengers were overcome with excitement. You giggled like a little girl.

There were some more announcements. I put a finger on my lips to tell you to be quiet.

"Between the seventh of June and the eighth of July you can see the sun shining at midnight."

When the train journey ended at Lodingen, I said, as we were getting down, "Bahira, why don't you check your baggage!" You looked embarrassed but didn't say anything.

We got down from the train and drank some tea. The sea was before us.

"Do we have to travel further on the sea?" you asked. I just nodded in assent.

A bus stood in front of us. All the passengers boarded it. "Are we to cross the sea in a bus..." "Wait a bit. Everything will soon become clear."

The bus started off and after travelling a short distance it entered the bowels of the large ship standing before us. The passengers got down and began to stroll on the deck of the ship.

When we reached the opposite shore, the bus came out of the ship on to the road—en route to Hasta.

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"I never imagined in all my life that I could visit a place so snow bound. Coming to Norway has been an extraordinary experience for me." My eyes were fixed on your face when you said this. Your lips had turned blue with the cold.

I had an extra pullover. When I gave it to you, you refused to wear it.

"You'll need it..." you said shyly.

"Oh, I belong to an ice-cold area in the Himalayas. You won't be able to bear this bitter chill! You might even freeze into a mummy. The Norwegian government might have to build a pyramid to keep you safe till eternity!" Everyone was laughing but you were glaring at me, full of suppressed anger.

We had to leave for Bergen by ship around twelve. From there we would visit Tramso and Finmark.

When the ship arrived at exactly twelve o'clock, we had finished nibbling at the snacks that constituted our lunch. The ship was heated, so it was a relief for everyone to get inside. Snow, water, fjords, forests. Huge, desolate landmasses! The ship progressed, slicing its way through the water.

I took everyone up to the deck.

Turning to you I said, "Look, that day in Kragera I was talking about the Gulf Stream, it flows from there up to here. Then it goes ahead to Tramso, Finmark, where it ends."

A white seagull, that looked much like a pigeon, was flying over the endless waters, screeching harshly. When it got tired, it would return to perch on the ship again.

You were gazing into my eyes, searching for something. You murmured, "I'm glimpsing this extraordinary world for the first and last time. That's why I want to see it through your eyes..."

"You'll see nothing but sand, and burning sand through my eyes. You must have seen the Sahara desert. You'll find such scorching-broiling deserts scattered everywhere, whose heat one has to bear on one's own. This greenery outside is real, but when it remains nothing but a mirage, then..."

"You mean this reality is not real?"

"Of course it's real. An individual manages to traverse all the dry, sandy oceans of his or her life on the boats of these momentary mirages. As they keep you company through the course of your existence, these passing pleasures sometimes prove to be the greatest truths..."

You burst out laughing, in your simple, easy way.

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"Don't you feel fearful, looking at these vast, desolate regions? Don't you feel terrified? How do people manage to survive in this endless void?"

In reply you kept gazing into the emptiness.

After a while you broke the silence, saying, "Over here, even this desolation gives me a lot of solace. Sometimes I think, if I could have my way, I'd bring everything here—my house, my children, my city, my river Nile, my pyramids, and spend the rest of my life in peace." You said this as if you were speaking not to me but to yourself when you voiced it aloud.

I smiled faintly and said, "Aren't you carrying it all with you wherever you go? Don't you know that there is far more energy in the imagination than in reality? There is nothing more real than fantasy."

A chilly, icy wind was blowing on the deck. You were shivering, your teeth chattering. Your hand was freezing—as cold as ice, when I touched it.

"Let's go down. We'll have some piping hot coffee."

Just then Raya came along, searching for something.

The restaurant was full. Most of the passengers on the ship were elderly Europeans. They were roaming about restlessly, as if searching for some kind of peace.

When we reached Tramso, the heatless yellow light of the sun had turned even more faint. After it had helped us disembark, the sun turned further north and vanished somewhere among the snowy mountains.

"The ship will take us to Hasta when it returns from Finmark," Raya was saying.

The bus was standing outside.

All the tourists boarded it. The conductor was playing the role of a guide now.

When we reached the top of the snow covered mountain with the help of the ropeway that stretched towards the sky, we discovered an even more extraordinary world there.

"This is Lapland. The natives of this place are known as Laps or Samis. When we go a little further we'll find sledges drawn by dogs. Some pulled by reindeer too. Their snow covered houses..."

We found a few houses built on snow. A settlement of Laps. Smoke rose from them. Close by were sheds for the reindeer. Fierce, bear-like dogs were barking, straining at their leashes.

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The visitors' bright, colourful clothes made them stand out even at a distance, marking their difference. Little by little, a celebratory mood built up in that snowbound wilderness. Raya was crooning some tune. When, after much persuasion she broke into a Georgian dance along with the song, the onlookers began to sway to the beat. When we asked you, you refused to sing. I don't know why you were so sad inside.

"You won't be in this company again or in these surroundings, see anything like it. These moments can become a happy memory. Come on, sing an Egyptian song, the way you did that day."

You couldn't refuse my request.

Drawn by the beauty of your song, some Laps came out of their houses to join us.

It had turned so cold now that it was becoming impossible to stop there much longer.

They waved to us, saying, "Haday!" We too turned and waved back together, with hands that were numb and blue.

We were standing at Tramso harbour with our respective baggage. The ship coming from Finmark was an hour late.

The question was, how were we to pass the time in the minus fifteen-degree chill? We were surprised to find that there were no arrangements at the harbour.

Close by, there was a glass-enclosed telephone booth. We turned towards it. There was only enough space for one person. I said, "You stay here for a while. I'm just coming."

When I returned, I noticed that your eyelashes were wet.

"Why? What happened?" I asked, surprised.

"I phoned Abira and told her that I was calling from the northernmost point of Norway in the Arctic Circle. And that there was snow all around. That there was a strangely uplifting atmosphere...I was just saying that, when she screamed, 'Mamma, have you gone crazy? You've forgotten! What did Dr. Hamid say when you were leaving for Norway? Now you won't return alive from there. I knew it, that you'd make such a mistake...' She burst out crying loudly."

I said, my tone full of anxiety, "If that was the case, first of all you shouldn't have come here. And once you had, you shouldn't have called. You could have called from Hasta yesterday or from Ewen Shayar."

I forced you to put on my thick, cloak-like, woollen coat.

When the ship arrived in a short while, it was as if we'd come back to life.

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The vessel was heated. Everyone collapsed on the sofas in a state of semi-consciousness. We asked the engineer to turn up the heating a bit.

Little by little the green of the leaves began to turn. Trees, forests, and mountains—all were changing. The mountain that was covered with green earlier, began to slowly turn yellow. In a few days, all of nature would be bathed in red.

To see the leaves take on the colours of flowers was an experience in itself. We felt it more deeply while returning to Oslo from Tramso.

The time to return was slowly drawing closer. There were only three days left now.

One evening you came to the reception searching for me. "Sorry, my ticket has not been confirmed for the sixteenth. I'll have to leave on the seventeenth morning now. The flight from Paris to Cairo is full."

"This guest house has been booked only till the sixteenth. It'll empty out on the sixteenth," I said, in a worried tone. "Will you stay here all alone?"

"It's possible that someone else might turn up, with a similar problem. When I went and told them about my predicament at the office, they said that I would have to pay from my own pocket for the one extra day. I'll pay..."

I had noticed that as the time to leave was coming closer, the look of sadness was deepening in your face. You appeared lost, drifting in who knows which world of your own.

The business of making plane reservations, shopping, was already in motion.

"Setneki Agnes of Hungary has invited all those who went to Tramso for a party. Aren't you going?" When you said this, I turned and put the same question to you, "Aren't you going?"

"I don't feel like going anywhere," you said, ending the yawning silence. "OK, let's go to the sea shore. You haven't taken me out for coffee for a long time. You've become really stingy."

I didn't say anything, just smiled. Somewhere inside, you found this irritating.

"I really enjoy sitting by the sea at Aker Bregge. Watching the colourful ships come and go. The seagulls flying on top of the waves, touching

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them now and again. Squawking loudly as they circle the sky! Let's meet them once more...!" You sounded distracted.

"You must be having seagulls there in Egypt too," I said, doubtingly.

"There must be millions and billions of women, but is there another Bahira Shafeeq in the world? Everyone doesn't have an substitute."

Folding my hands apologetically, I rose, "Come, your excellency, let's go to Aker Bregge. Come and meet your seagulls. You will not see them again."

You strolled along chirping now, almost as if you were flying. The heaviness dragging at your face was no longer so pronounced.

After having coffee in the restaurant, you said, "Come, let's sit out in the open, we can look at the sea and at the seagulls too."

There were four or five large statues in the circular park in front of the Town Hall—of a mother and her little children—all nude! But there was nothing offensive about them. The tender expression of maternal love on the mother figure's face seemed to provide a new dimension.

"Didn't you write anything here?" you asked, looking at me.

"Haven't you seen, the way we've been running around from morning till night? Every night there's either a cultural or literary evening or a party which goes on till late..."

"Okay, tell me, will you write a story based on these experiences?"

"Perhaps..."

"And what will the ending be like?" you asked, with child-like curiosity.

I was silent for a very long time. You kept watching me intently, trying to read the play of emotion on my face, which changed from moment to moment.

"There can be two kinds of endings—one happy, one sad!"

"What'll happen in the sad one?"

"When we part, you'll say in a choked voice that the mummies placed in the pyramids thousands of years ago were wrapped in muslin produced in India. When you get back, please send me a length of white cloth similar to it. Before I die, I'll state that it's my last wish that I should be wrapped in that cloth when I'm put away forever. That fabric will be my last garment..."

I noticed, that as I was moving ahead, you were growing more and more serious.

"OK, in the happy one..."

"In the happy one you'll be chirping with joy at the prospect of going home. You'll give me a send off party. And when we leave you'll

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come up to the airport and say good bye with a smile, with the words, 'See you again!'"

I left Oslo one day before you did.

Neither of the two endings came true at the end. Two weeks after reaching India, I received a brief note from you.

"I have only wept aloud on two occasion in my life. The first was when President Nasser was assassinated. The second—when you went away and I was left all alone in the haunted guesthouse!"

Translated from Hindi by Deepa Agarwal

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Maid

Pradip Bihari

People say this girl's character is not good, she doesn't work whole heartedly anywhere. She would work properly for two-three days and then she would be absent. She has an array of reasons to explain her absenteeism.

All colony dwellers know about her. Already, she has worked in most of the households. About her, most housewives hold the unanimous opinion, "Keeping her is similar to rearing pigeons."

First, her sister came to work at my place. She was the elder one. Perhaps she worked for a week. Then she stopped. My wife had said to her, "Call your parents. You are young to talk about money."

But her sister kept dilly-dallying and didn't turn up.

She had come three days after her sister left the work. My wife said, "She won't let her work because she doesn't have a guardian."

My wife doesn't keep well. For the past six years she is living with a maturing pain in her backbone. Despite so much of medication she hasn't improved. Pain keeps playing hide and sick but doesn't disappear. It almost takes her life away when it strikes. At last the only safeguard is to refrain from bending. Physical work catapults the pain. Sweeping and mopping are pain-causing for her. Hence, a maid is essential at my home.

The Girl kept standing. My wife asked, "Why hasn't your sister come?"

"Her brother-in-law came at Durga Pooja and took her to her in-laws' house."

"Your parents" my wife said, "why don't they come?"

The girl said, "I am not a thief. I have worked with many households. Ask them. In case you hear one complaint, you can chuck me out."

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"The complaint is, she would work for two days and not for four consecutive days."

"This won't happen now," she said in a committed voice, "I work only in a few houses and I'll come twice a day."

I thought this 'one-inch-tall' girl won't be able to attend to the whole of the household work. I said, "Even she can't handle everything well herself."

She said politely, "I can do all that. Chores, sweeping...mopping...washing utensils everything."

I saw myself calculating the money part. With a pause, she said, "Alright, work. But I won't pay you more than one hundred rupees."

"No, this is not good," in a grey voice she said, "because of the work in this house, I have left work at other places. They were paying less. Now, I only work in the corner house of Mr. Jha." She stopped and again said, "Others have motor to draw water but here there is only a hand-pump."

My wife thought that the girl had a point. "Okay! Work. After satisfying myself with your work I will pay you a hundred per month. Work properly. It should be absolutely clean. And yes..." with a small pause she said, "DSP Saheb is my husband's friend. Even if one spoon gets missing, you will be punished."

She listened to everything.

I thought...this 10-11-year-old girl won't be able to do the whole of the household work.

She started working. She used to come twice daily, early in the morning and at four in the afternoon.

One day I asked my wife, "Why does she come so early?"

She said, "after the morning chores, she goes to school. Secondly, it's a help in the morning as you also go to office during that time."

Now, one thing was added to my wife's schedule. Everyday as I returned from the office, she would say something about the girl. Sometimes I liked it and sometimes did not.

One day, my wife said, "The girl stares at things. Her behaviour is not acceptable. I advised her to be careful."

That day as I was shaving, I heard it. My wife was shouting at her, "I asked you to mop and you are watching TV. Go and work."

Silently, she picked up the bucket and went to work. My wife would often get angry at her. One day she said, "She speaks more than she works."

"What?"

"Without reason, she questions."

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"What does she ask?" I said.

She said, "You have an old washing machine. Nobody keeps this model now. Did you get this free?"

I felt bad. I said to my wife, "Be serious. Let a servant be like a servant. If you give her the liberty, she would speak nonsense to you. You should not talk anything else except about work with these servants."

"Not only this..." Wife said, "She was saying, are you satisfied watching this portable black and white TV? Why don't you buy a colour one?"

My wife decided, if the girl keeps talking like this, she would ask her to leave. But immediately she recalled her pitiable backache and deferred her decision.

Another habit I dislike in the girl was that, whenever both of my sons would sit to eat, she would constantly gaze at them. Whenever I saw it, I would stop her, and she sneaks away. Then she would loiter around and again come back. For this reason alone I shout at her.

She left school and now started staying at my home longer. When I asked my wife, I found that earlier she used to get a mid-day meal at school and that was why she continued. Now, it has been stopped, so she had left school.

I had returned from office. The girl was standing on the verandah in despair. I went inside and asked my wife, "What has happened?"

She burst out, "Today this dwarf girl has done what is beyond my tolerance. If she is so fond of then...."

I felt that, she refrained from saying bad words about her. I asked, "What had she done?"

"What wrong she can do more than this?" she said, "She was applying my make-up on the dressing table...and...."

"What and...?"

"And after that she touched up her lips with the lipstick."

I didn't say anything.

"Because of this, I have slapped her today."

"At least now your anger should disappear."

"How can it?" My wife said, "I told her I will not keep her anymore. She said, she would...."

"What?"

"That she would leave the work in all the other house but yours."

"Why?"

"Other people give me stale food, here I get fresh, hot breakfast," she said. While saying this, my wife went to see her in the verandah. I also went there.

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The girl was not there.

It was the festival of light — Deepavali — that day. The whole day she stayed at my home. Kept doing tidbits of work. On festivals housewives have more work to do. Her presence was a support. She knew everything about the kitchen.

The sun set. She made a paste of rice. My wife painted an *alpana* at the entrance of the house. The girl was surprised. Excited, she said, "You draw *alpana* in an absolutely different way." In a country vein she said, "Here *Lashmi ghar Dariddar Bahar* is not written in the manner as you did."

All through the day, both my sons distributed sun-dried crackers. The elder one said to the younger, "Give me more crackers and you keep the phuljhari. You will not be able to crack bombs." But the little one was not to agree. At the end he could manage to get half the share of that.

I saw the girl was roaming around my sons.

Before lighting the oil lamps on the festive evening, her younger sister had come to call her. But she didn't go. She replied, "You go. I will come after taking prasad."

Evening turned to night. The prayer got delayed. Again her sister came to call her, "Come! Bhaiya has come. He is looking for you."

Hearing about her elder brother, she reflected fear. Quickly, she got ready. She said to my wife, "My brother has come. I am going."

My wife bid her farewell for the day. She gave her some eatables. She said to her, "Prayers have not started. You come tomorrow, get the utensils back and take your prasad."

The girl went to the verandah. In a mime her younger sister asked, "Did they give you crackers?"

By way of answer, she made a face and said, "That is what I had been waiting for, so long. Had I got some, wouldn't I have been happy to share them with you?"

Translated from Maithili by Pranav Bihari

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My Mamu's Daughter

Rohini Muthuswami

Up the Kollimalai hills, an arduous two-hour climb away from Perungudam village, about two hours drive from the district office at Dindigul, is a small hamlet. Up there, the sky is the palest blue, green trees dot the horizon, the air is crystal clear. There is no noise out here, no pollution, no shops, no cinema...idyllic.

Thirty families live here. About an hour's walk away is a small stream, every day women from the hamlet come down here to collect water. One hour down and one hour up for one pot of water. They haven't heard of milk and butter out here. The children run about bare foot and naked, and malnourished. There are no hospitals, no schools. And when the time comes for a baby to be born, the local midwife is called...sometimes.

When I went to the village to see the newly established child-care centre, there was this little girl of about ten wearing a faded red skirt, a trifle too long, wrapped around her thin waist, who danced like a dervish. The skirt kept slipping; she would pause, tie it up, and start dancing again.

"She is ten," said my host. "Girls here are married off when they reach puberty."

"Her education?"

He shrugged, "She knows how to read and write her name. She is literate, a big improvement over her mother who does not know even that. Maybe the next generation, or the one after that, or the one...who knows?"

Kashmir is far away from the Kollimalai hills—about two thousand kilometers away. I have been to Kollimalai but I have never been to Kashmir. I do not know anything about its green valleys and its pristine peaks. I have never seen the Dal Lake or the Nishat gardens. And I

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don't know why Jahangir said that if there was a paradise on earth, then it was this, it was this, it was this. I don't know anything about it...and yet Kashmir is part of my country just as Kollimalai hills are.

My country. Truth to tell, we as a family are not very patriotic. What I mean is that no one in my family fought for Indian Independence both my grandfathers were busy eking out a living in a remote village in the south of India, more concerned about getting their daughters married and giving their sons a decent education than about freedom for their country. My paternal grandmother, when India got independence, was believed to have said that it was much nicer under the whites for then we got the railways and telephones and whatnots. She was not much enamoured of the concept of free India. And to the day she died she maintained that life was much better when the Englishman ruled India.

When India awoke at the stroke of midnight, both my grandfathers had long retired. Upstairs in the only room, under the light of a hurricane lamp, my uncles and Father kept vigil. They knew that India was getting her freedom at that very hour but there was no radio in the house so they missed the speech Nehru made. They stayed up that night crouching besides that hurricane lamp while far away in Delhi in a grand, pompous ceremony, the British flag was lowered and the tricolor was unfurled high in the skies. India was free at last and the vigil was the way my uncles and Father marked that important hour. Next day bleary-eyed and yawning they went about their usual business. Two days later, they read in the newspaper about the events in the far away Delhi. And then life went about on an even keel, at least as mush as it could. India was free but there was a life to be led and poverty was never far away.

But up in the North, quite some distance from my grandfather's village, India and Pakistan were going through violent birth pains. People were being uprooted, looted, murdered, raped...it was as though the beast in man had woken up from slumber. This happened in the north; down south, Partition was just a word. It was never to touch their lives.

Or mine. Growing up in Bangalore I had no glimpse into the psyche of the people rendered homeless by Partition. Or a clue as to what was happening in Kashmir. Other than that the country across the border was supporting militancy, that they wanted to merge with Pakistan or become independent, and that if there had been no sentimental moonshine, the issue would have never reached UN and we never would have the spectre of referendum hanging over our heads like the sword of Damocles. That about sums up the issue. And when we went nuclear, I hooted for our country.

Actually when one is viewing from inside, the panorama is warped.

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We see what we want to see. Like the three monkeys, we shut our eyes, close our ears, and put a hand in front of our mouths, lest we do, say, or see the unseemly. Bombarded by the state-owned press or the highly patriotic news channels, how much do we really know? I mean do we really pay attention to the fact that our maid-servants' child has dropped out of school (you know how these people are, is what we say), or that there exists a substantial population that does not have access to health care, or that we spend a huge amount of our budget on defense... these are but examples. There is so much that I learnt when I stepped outside.

Outside, you take a fresh look. The blinkers sort of come out, for those who take them out. I mean have you ever attended those parties hosted by your friend where we all gather and start telling each other what exactly is wrong with India? On one issue we are all united: Kashmir is ours, we tell each other. None of us have been there but we all agree that it is ours. And when India tested those nuclear bombs, we all supported it with vehemence—it was our birthright that we go nuclear. Look at the irony! On the day of Buddha Purnima we went nuclear. Poor Buddha! He who stood for peace was forced to see on his birthday the spectacle of his country going nuclear...we the citizens of the country where he preached believe that nuclearization will bring peace.

I don't know. I mean I really don't know now. Not after I went to Kollimalai hills. Not after I learnt about the health care system (the non-existent one, I mean), and not after I learnt about the primary education (or rather the failure of it). It is then I started having doubts. What are we doing? Was defense really the most important aspect that it swallows a major chunk of our budget?

You don't know about my brother, do you? I never talk about him. You know right after those nuclear bombs went off, there was no peace. Instead there was another war between the two countries over Kashmir. This was the war I lost my brother in. My brother, who, being the most patriotic one in the family, had enlisted in the army soon after finishing school.

"Darling, there are so many careers for a bright person like you," my mother had been at her persuasive best.

But to no avail. To the general consternation of everyone in the extended family, that silly young goofer went into the Army. And died.

Have you ever lost a brother? The one from whom you learnt how to make a paper airplane, the one who stood by you when you went to the school the first time, the one whom you bullied mercilessly

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even though he was the older one but being the sister you believed that all brothers need to be bullied so as to be kept in check, the one whom you teased relentlessly when you found about his girl friend, the one whom you hero-worshipped though wild horses would not drag it out of you, especially to him.

And the one you believe has not died but will walk through the door again with that ridiculous, sloppy grin on his face and pull your silly little pigtails? Once more?

Time they say will heal the wound but time takes her time...

Meantime, life goes on. Though your mother has lost that sparkle in her eyes and your father sometimes seems lost in thought but life goes on....

And doubts crept in. What was this whole thing about? Why are we fighting? Why did my brother have to die? And then that girl up the Kollimalai hills...I simply don't know...

* * *

I was at the Chicago Airport waiting to board my plane to Vancouver. My cousin in Vancouver was getting married and I was going to attend it. There was a four-hour wait at the O'Hare airport and I tried to while away the time by walking from one terminal to another, lugging my heavy hand baggage with me. But one can walk only so much. After a period, I flopped down on a chair and promptly fell asleep.

When I woke about half hour later, an elderly lady was occupying the chair opposite me, talking to a woman about my age. The lady was wearing a peacock-blue saree, her silver-grey hair was neatly piled up on her head, and a dab of lipstick brightened her face. The girl was wearing a pale yellow salwar-kameez. And they were talking.

"Are you from Pakistan?" the elderly lady asked.

The girl shook her head.

"No, from India."

"Where from in India?" the lady persisted.

"Bangalore," and I smiled for she was from my hometown. But before I could say anything, they swept on.

"I went there once," the lady said. "Long time back. For my honeymoon actually," a tiny smile hovered around her lips, that memory was a most cherished one.

A short silence reigned, more like a pause, as the older lady collected her thoughts.

"I was born in Delhi, you know," she started chattily. "Then of

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course it was undivided. We lived in Chandni Chowk area. My father was a doctor, a man of contradictions. A very progressive man for his times who believed in educating all of us, my five sisters I mean, but at the same time very orthodox, especially where religion was concerned. So you know, I was married off when I was just fifteen. Fortunately my husband's family was also very broad in their outlook and my husband was, is, very, very ahead of his times, so between them they saw that I fulfilled my dreams of becoming a doctor. I practice in Islamabad."

"Where are you going?" suddenly she asked the girl, putting a brake on her story.

"Los Angeles."

"What fun!" the lady exclaimed girlishly. "I too am going to Los Angeles. My daughter lives there. I have two grandchildren."

"You know seeing you bring back memories of my old days. Days when I used to live in Delhi," she continued happily. "We were five sisters, and one brother. We all migrated to Pakistan when Partition occurred. I was the oldest and had been married for six months when we decided to move. My husband's family was originally from Lahore, they still had a haveli there, and it was just a matter of course that we moved back to Lahore. Oh God! How I hated it in the beginning. I used to tell my husband that if I had known all this before I would have never consented to marry him!" she grinned at the girl and continued, "My father's decision was a bit tough. Especially on my mother whose family was all scattered in and around Delhi. Her roots were in Delhi and now Father wanted to pluck it out forcibly and replant it in what she considered as foreign land. But my father was adamant. When Hindustan becomes free, we will be treated as second-class citizens, he said. I prefer that than to die in a foreign land, my mother cried passionately. Rubbish, said my father and one month after we — my husband and I — with his family, had moved. My father had our family pack up and move to where I was. It was a new beginning for him na, so he preferred to be where I was.

"You know I did not want to leave either. Probably if I had been unmarried I would have stuck on in India with my Mamu's family. He had a daughter, Nafisa. For me, leaving meant tearing myself away from her. She was my best friend. She lived close to where we lived, just a couple galis away. We both went to the same school, on the way back we would stop at Ghantewala's to buy sweets, we would fight and make up, and we would laugh and cry, we would play pranks on our unsuspecting brothers and sister," she started laughing remembering those days.

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"Really I have no clue why I am telling you all this!" she exclaimed. "I am boring you, na?"

The girl protested, "No, no, you are not. You know I have never met a person who had lived through the Partition. This is just so fascinating. Please do go on."

"The south was not affected," she nodded her head. "I remember how beautiful Bangalore and Mysore were when I went there for my honeymoon. I had always wanted to see the Dusshera festival in Mysore. It was so royal and grand. Do they still have it? Yes? Oh, how lovely," she exclaimed as the girl nodded her head, "So I told my fiancé that is where I wanted to go for the honeymoon. He made all the arrangements and we went there. Nafisa went to Mussorie...she was always one for the mountains. Nafisa and I got married on the same day...thankfully the bridegrooms were different," she chuckled, her eyes mischievously twinkling.

"But you know when all these talks about Partition started, we were very upset. My Mamu said that he was not going to move. He was born here and he would die here, thank you very much. Nafisa's husband was of the same opinion. His family was going to move but Nafisa's husband said rubbish. He was with the Congress. It was a love marriage, you know. He used to come to my Mamu's house and he met Nafisa there. He proposed marriage, Nafisa said that she would marry only if Anis also got married. So a bridegroom was hurriedly searched for me. Oh dear, the things we used to do! Crazy, na?

"Anyway, Nafisa was going to stay back. And so was Mamu. He was very angry with my father. How can you betray your country, he asked my father. And my father retorted that Pakistan was his country, whereupon Mamu walked out of the house saying that he would never ever step back into it again. My mother, through this odyssey, cried her heart out."

"But Partition happened," she said with a sense of inevitability, "and when it happened I was in medical college."

"And your cousin?"

"We used to keep in touch in those early days. The border was still fluid, na. We would write long letters filled with minute details about what was happening in our lives. Nafisa and her husband even came to Lahore once to see how we all were. We of course never ever went back. The ties were all snapped.

"And then as the years passed, we became slowly immersed in our day to day lives, our families, our jobs...the letters petered out to once a month to once a year to nothing. And then there was silence."

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"Sometimes I would reminisce with my husband about those days and wonder how Nafisa was."

"Then about four years back, I was at the London Airport in transit to Los Angeles. My daughter just had her second baby and I was going to help her out. And there was this lady seated across me who looked vaguely familiar. You know how it is, the shape of the eyebrow, the cut of the face, the eyes, or just the way a person talks or walks reminds you of someone else. She was wearing a pink salwar-kameez and I kept staring at her, wondering whom she reminded me off.

"And then she turned and saw me staring at her. So stupid of me, na? I apologized and told her that she just happened to remind me of someone but so foolishly I could not figure out who the person was. We started talking then, about our families, where we were going, where we were from, and I was telling that I grew up in Delhi and she told me that she lived in Delhi. And then we were exchanging our addresses, our husband's names, our father's names, and falling on each other's neck as though we were long-lost cousins."

"She was Nafisa?"

She nodded.

"Strange it was, meeting like that in another country. Nafisa had put on weight, she had been as slim as a reed, and I had been the fat one. I felt I was living in some dreamland, my dearest wish coming true. Nafisa's daughter lives in San Diego and she and my daughter are as close as Nafisa and I are. We always plan our trips you know so that we can spend maximum time together. Funny, na? Members of the same family having to meet in another country?

"You know I work in Islamabad, in a government hospital. So many poor patients, dear, and no health care for them. No education. No water. No electricity. And what do we spend our money on? On making war and defense equipment! Tell me, is the bomb required for countries that do not, can not, even provide the most basic amenities for its people? Two meals a day is not possible for some and we make bombs."

"For Kashmir..."

"And tell me what will either of us do with that piece of land? Is it going to bring us prosperity or are we going to bring happiness to those people?"

"No," murmured the girl. "Yet we fight."

"Ego problem," declared the woman. "That is all there to it. No one wants to back off."

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"Schoolboys squabbling," the girl said, with laughter in her voice, making our governments something like what we were when we were kids fighting for a piece of sweetmeat.

My tongue loosened, "You know there is a village atop this hill in South India...the girl was dancing like a dervish...no school...no hospitals...no water....my brother, you know...

"Flight 335 to Los Angeles is ready for boarding. Passengers are requested to board the flight at Gate 23B".

"That is our flight, dear. Come let us go," she gathered her stuff and walked towards the gate with the girl.

My sentence was left hanging in mid-air.

* * *

The village atop the Kollimalai hills is still there. That young girl in the faded red skirt got married long time back. And there continues to be no school, no water, and no hospital

The fight goes on in Kashmir.

Sometimes I want the death of my brother revenged. But on whom will I avenge it? Those across the border, they too are like us, aren't they? So killing them...whom will I kill? My mother says it is all fated...but really is all this fated?

❑

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The Decision

Surjit Sarna

The moment of decision had come. It had to be made today, and it was Kanwal alone who had to take the decision. As far as the others were concerned, things had already been decided. She had been under intense pressure from all sides these last few days. She had felt completely isolated and did not know whom to turn to for help...and who was there to come to her aid.

Fate had dealt her the cruellest blow, and sent her world crashing around her with the twinkling of an eye. The accident had snatched Satinder from her. She had herself been severely injured and on regaining consciousness, had come to know that he had gone ahead, leaving her bereft and alone.

Why did she not die? What was there to live for now? They had been married for three years...and now there was only a lovely little girl, her precious Minnu, to remind her of Satinder. She had cried her heart out but Satinder had not come back. He had gone so far away from her that her entreaties could no longer move him.

Being the youngest in her family, she was the pet of her parents. Enveloped in a cocoon of love, she had led a carefree and happy existence.

But the searing winds had ripped away her cocoon, and the solid ground under her feet had crumbled, leaving her broken and bewildered. She seemed to be running towards a destination which was both unknown and elusive...traversing a road which was hot and dusty, with no shade or shelter.

They had all come to commiserate and console her and when leaving, had told her, "What can one say? One can't fight Him."

Kanwal's mother had cried and embracing her, had wailed, "Whose evil eye has destroyed my daughter's world? What a terrible calamity!"

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Her brothers were helpless. They could do nothing for their dear sister.

Finally her parents left home. Her brothers had gone back earlier. How long could they sit around doing nothing?

When he left, her father had blessed her and told her, "What can we do, child?...If we take you with us, people will talk. But we don't want to leave you here...we are afraid of what may happen...."

He had taken leave of Kanwal's mother-in-law with folded hands and said: "Sister, we leave her to your care...."

Wiping her tears with the edge of her dupatta, she had replied, "You need have no worry about her, Vir Ji..."

Time was slipping from her grasp. It cannot stop to ponder over what is past or may happen in the future. Gradually, the whole household work had been passed on to Kanwal. She was busy the whole day, cooking meals, washing clothes, cleaning up. She had no time even to look after her little girl properly, who followed her around, whining and crying the whole day long, clinging to her legs. If Kanwal sat down with her for some time, there were calls for her from all sides. Even, Minnu was not treated properly—she who had been the darling of the family when Satinder was alive. Now she was ignored and neglected. Had she been a boy, perhaps they would have been more concerned. But, she was a girl, and could be neglected.

Kanwal's parents visited her every month...Their beloved daughter was withering before their eyes. She cried when they came, but she had very little time to sit and talk to them in private. Her mother-in-law hovered around them all the time they were there... When her father gave her five thousand rupees before leaving, she would try to refuse, but her mother-in-law would intervene, "Take it. Kanwal, it is for Minnu...It is all right." Then turning to her father, she would say, "Not that she lacks for any thing. The only thing that she doesn't have, we cannot give her. What can we do?" And lifting the edge of her dupatta to wipe her tears, she would give a deep sigh. The moment her parents stepped out, she would snatch the bundle of notes from Kanwal.

Kanwal's brother in-law and his wife, who had always been so respectful, now had no time to talk to her. She could not comprehend what had happened to all the love these people had for her earlier. Was she such a terrible burden that they found it difficult even to acknowledge her presence? She was no better than a maid for them, there, yet not there.

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Then, one evening when she was crossing her mother-in-law's bedroom, she heard her own name and stopped to listen to what was being said. She was on the outer veranda and was standing in the dark. They were talking in low tones, but she heard all that was being said distinctly.

It was, Satinder's father's voice, "Tomorrow she can ask for her share in the property. Satinder's share is hers."

"She will then go to her parents after she gets her share. This is what will happen, you just wait and watch, Daddy," this was her brother-in-law. "Don't even let her get a whiff of this, but sell off Satinder's shops and house on the quiet," her mother-in-law advised.

"We will see...Minnu will also have to be married off."

"Why should we bother about that? Her parents will shoulder that responsibility," this was Minnu's grandmother, remonstrating with her husband.

"This time when her parents come, let her go with them," Kanwal's brother-in-law suggested.

"Your wife is not going to do the house work....Who will look after everything? Then, we are getting an amount of money from them every month," her mother-in-law objected.

"This is the best thing at present," her father-in-law declared. "Let her go for the time being. Don't worry about the money. There can be more problems if she stays on."

The conversation had lapsed after that and she slipped away quietly, preoccupied about what she had overheard. Their worry was that she will stake a claim to her share of the property. It is my share, she thought, why shouldn't I ask for it? She was restless and the hostility around her had made her more uneasy.

When her parents came this time, she told her mother-in-law that she wanted to go with them.

"If you want, then do go. Why should I stop you?" Was her answer, "But we will miss you both so much."

Kanwal was well aware of this, for now they will all have to fend for themselves. They will not get such a devoted maid who did all the work without a single word of complaint. But what she had overheard that evening seemed to have turned her heart to stone. How naive had she been! Why had she stayed on here after Satinder's death? Did she have no rights here, no claims on anything—property, house, money, even the money that her parents gave her every month, but which also was snatched from her? Kanwal had not responded and had come away with her parents that very day.

Now she was in a better frame of mind. She could breathe freely and think about herself and her child.

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Kanwal's brothers wanted her to get married again. Her mother also wanted the same. "You can't live alone all your life...if we can find a good match, then where is the harm?" She had said...

"Mummy, I don't want to."

"That may be...I understand your feelings. It doesn't matter as long as we are alive, but what after that? Your brothers' wives...they are very good to you, but who wants to take on a life-long responsibility? Why should they?"

Kanwal did not answer. Can't I look after myself, she had thought to herself. Then her elder brother had brought a proposal. The man was a divorcee with a son from his previous marriage. They had all discussed the proposal last evening. Mandeep, her brother had made enquiries and had been satisfied.

"He has a good business, a house, a car and all that this means. But there is one thing..."

"What?"

"He wants that Minnu should live with us..."

"And his son?" Kanwal wanted to know.

"Of course he will be living with you both."

"You don't understand, child, you have a daughter. Tomorrow she will have to get married... but why should he take on that responsibility? Minnu will live with us."

"Mandeep, you did right to tell us this. What sort of justice is this? My daughter will live with my parents and his son with me! How did you think that I can live without Minnu? Do you also want to get rid of me?" She burst into tears and rushed out of the room.

Early next morning, she went to her parents room...and putting her arms around her mother, said—"Mummy I don't want to get married, I will not be a burden to you," Tears ran down her cheeks.

Her father held her tightly and said—"Don't worry Kanwal, you don't have to get married if you don't want to..."

"Papa...I don't want to get married...I don't want to get caught in another storm. I have had enough...I want to live my life my own way for my self...for Minnu..."

"Yes, child...you are right...you have already been through a lot...I will get the shop on the Rajpur Road renovated, you can set up your boutique...are you happy now?"

"Yes..., Yes..." Kanwal said smiling through her tears, "I will make my own life.I want to do things my own way."

Translated from Punjabi by Tripti Jain

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The Outcastes at the Funeral

Udai Bhanu Pandey

I could not relish in the least my cousins guffawing in this manner. But, they went on giggling and guffawing as if there would be no end to their fit. Both of them were six-footers like me and looked like Danny Dengjompa. No sooner had they arrived at my residence than they had begun to guzzle and they were dizzy and delirious by the time they arrived at the funeral grounds. Only ghouls could afford to guffaw in this manner near the dead bodies of their near and dear ones, said I to myself. Although drinking in the funeral and bathing the dead body with *Harlong* (rice beer) was a part of our tribe's tradition and many mourners had swilled wine to their heart's content, the majority being non-tribals, but none of the tribal mourners laughed except the toughs of Tiwadi; it was both confusing and offending to me. Tiwadi, the Brahmin with a pointed nose, had brought many bottles and was busy guzzling under the shade of a tree in the company of the tribal mourners just for the sake of pampering and cajoling them. He was both a *saqui* (cup-bearer) and a *rind* (dissolute). The tribal boys were just mere pawns in his hand. He was surrounded by a score of Karbi boys perfectly boozed and making fun of the large mark of sandal paste applied to his fair and broad forehead. The seniors of my tribe too had drunk in moderation, but they were perfect figures of decency and civilized behaviour. They were not highly educated but culture and good manners were in their blood and marrow. Nupu and Hukur Sing were my father's sister's sons and they had developed a soft corner for us all on a sudden after an eternal spell of hatred towards my family and me for I had joined the Indian Revenue Service.

Despite my strong protest Tiwadi had arranged a truckload of firewood for the cremation though I had bought all the provisions of the *havan* with hard cash. The last rite was a fusion of the pure tribal

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tradition and the sanskritized Hindu convention. My beloved Professor Misra Sir had arranged four Brahmin priests well-versed in the Vedas and four Christian priests. There was no question of the Brahmin priests' drinking; even the Christian missionaries had not cast their glance upon the wine. They were dressed in black suits and carried the Bibles bound in a red material. They were reciting prayers for the peace of the departed soul. All the four belonged to my community, but they were men with a difference. While reciting the Bible their eyes were brimming over with tears, but the Hindu members of my tribe except my seven sisters, my three nieces and my maternal uncle Baranwal who was actually a Rajasthani businessman and my god-uncle only, had refused to shed any tears. (Like Sikhs most Karbis do not tend to weep at the funeral). In our tribe people do not wail and howl at the death and the rich hire mercenary mourners. Misra Sir observes that the soul never attains salvation unless the mourners weep bitterly. After the Bible recitation was over, the Brahmins began to chant the Vedic mantras and the entire assembly of the mourners was spellbound. Tiwadi was quite ignorant about the Vedas, but he was keen on overawing people about being a Brahmin. Handing his glass to one of his chums he burst out in English, "Don't forget that I also a Babhan." He made for the pyre but fell with a thud after staggering to his feet. The funeral ground reverberated with a loud guffaw, which seemed to rend the sky. I could mark out the fiercest laughter being that of my cousins. It was the time when the fire had nearly consumed the body and my soul was filled with mystic peace as I heard the sublime Vedic mantras being recited.

The ghoulish laugh of Nupu and Hukur Sing shattered my trance and brought me back to my childhood days. I was the only brother to my seven sisters. My *Po* (father) wanted to name me Krishno for my dark complexion, but my mother insisted, "Leave this Krishno business. If you name him Krishno he will keep on running after the girls. We will call him Ajut, the younger brother of Hemphu[2] (In the Karbi mythology Lord Vishnu is called Hemphu), who can kill the *Hiyis* (Hiyi means a demon)." Thus I became Krishno to my father and Ajut to my mother. It was only in the Matriculation examination that my official name was declared Ajut.

I was born in a village in the Nagaon district of Assam and my father possessed three hundred bighas of land. I am told that he was a total abstainer like me. But, he took to guzzling after his marriage. My father's both sisters branded my mother witch, though Baranwal uncle and other well-wishers swear that my mother is a goddess despite the fact that she deeply resented my father's generous nature. My house was

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like a hotel and wine flew like water when my uncles visited our family. My aunts, fully alive to my dad's affectionate nature always took undue advantage. My uncles were educated businessmen and they knew which way the bread was buttered. Both brothers cherished sky-high ambitions and wanted to make money hand over fist. They succeeded in getting around my simple and straight father and making him their business partner. My dad sold out 250 bighas of land in order to raise the capital for a business within a day. He did not heed my mother's warning. When the business crashed after three years my uncles wriggled out. They saved their skin saying, "We are simply ruined in this business. How can we return your money? But, we can do one thing. We can migrate to the headquarters town of the new autonomous district and occupy four-five hundred bighas of land by slashing and burning the nearby forest. The town is full of Pakistani labourers who can be hired cheaply and put to farming work. Don't you worry! Now we Karbis could be richer than the Mizos and the Nagas." But unwilling to leave his ancestral village, my dad refused to move. Furthermore, my mother who had Brahmin blood in her veins and she did not like the idea of living in an entirely tribal society. The unexpected reversal of fortune caused the beginning of the cold war in the family. My dad took to drinking and the family was haunted by a shadow of dejection.

So far the family did not have to waste lacs of rupees on the *chumangkan* (A very expensive shradha ceremony of the Karbis without which the departed soul cannot attain peace or solvation, according to the popular belief), for it was the first death in the family. But the expensive marriages of my sisters had caused the family an irreparable financial damage bringing it to the brink of ruin. The parental bickering left us the siblings shocked. Any discussion about our uncles made our dad lose his temper. My mother would be lost in domestic chores and myself in my books.

The month of December had just set in and I was thoroughly engrossed in my studies in the seventh standard. The evening was marred by a bitter tiff between my parents. After inflicting upon my mother a heavy blow of verbal injury dad ordered me to fetch *Harlong*. (The Karbi husbands have a reputation of being very polite and loving and they refrain from hurting their wives or any woman).

"Po, I have to write my mathematics examination tomorrow. I must study, mustn't I?" I had tried to refuse very politely, but he flew into a terrible rage.

"Your mother keeps on henpecking me because your grandpa's lands had to be sold out. But you are my true begotten son, aren't you?

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Why do you show me your temper then? Damn you, I am going to sacrifice all your bloody books to god *Agni*, you sala of mine!" And thus, he threw all my books into the fire that was keeping us warm in that chilly weather. When he left for the wine shop I told my mother that I was going to my neighbour as all my books and notes were reduced to ashes.

I left my home the next day at dawn. I took a job as a domestic servant at a grocery shop in a large village in the district. The Bihari businessman, my employer, took interest in my studies and cared to feed me well despite being a hard taskmaster. I used to visit my home from time to time to see my mother and my sisters, but made a point to return to my employer's before the sunset. After sitting for the matriculation examination I began to work in the city for earning enough money for my college education. I passed three months there tending the gardens and teaching yoga to the children of the officers and the professors. On my return to the village Tarachand Uncle hugged me warmly. The *Dainik Asom* had published my photograph on the front page; I had passed my exam securing the highest marks. It was Tarachand Uncle who slipped a sum of Rs.2000/ into my pocket for my education at Diphu, the District headquarters town of Karbi Anglong. After my college education I left for Guwahati and then for Allahabad. I ended as an officer of the central services posted at Bhopal. On my return to my village I noticed some change in my father's attitude towards me, though his bickering with my mother went on and on.

My favourite professor of Economics, Misra Sir advised me to get a house constructed at Diphu after my posting at Bhopal. When I came back to Assam for my holidays I came to learn that my uncles (my father's brothers-in-law) had cheated my family and they had a plantation of rubber gardens stretching into thousands of bighas. They had a thriving business of sawmills and constructed a palatial building in the town. Those were the times when both autonomous districts of Assam used to be havens for traders. I kept my two sisters at my Diphu residence under the supervision of my mother and took the remaining two to Bhopal for their higher education.

I was beset with the problem of entertaining an army of uninvited guests who would throng our house at Diphu, stay there for weeks and waste my sisters's and our mother's time. In order to keep such guests at bay I kept two German Shepherds and asked my mother to keep my sisters under strict discipline. My mother was happy and contented and willing to be with me at Bhopal, but my dad refused to leave Assam and his ancestral village at any cost. I had succeeded in fighting the family

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poverty. My two sisters were now married after high education and they were in the Assam Civil Service. The other two were in M.A. hoping to be settled. The first three were already married.

There was a considerable improvement in my dad. On my arrival at Assam I kept with my mother wines of good quality and asked her to ration it out in order to keep my dad away from excessive drinking. But he had failed to stop drinking altogether. After my success the poverty was averted and his two middle daughters were married respectably. But he was consumed by the heavy weight of a sense of guilt for having sold out his ancestral property. He would very often leave our beautiful house at Diphu for his village home. After swilling whisky in the evening he would recite in his male soprano voice *Sabin Alun (the Karbi Ramayana)* and go to bed after dinner. After staying at Bhopal for a week he would excuse himself saying, "Krishno, allow me to leave Baba, your mother would be lonely. Despite occasional tiffs I cannot bear the pangs of separation...my old girl must be miserable without me."

He was unable to stay at Diphu too for long. Very keen to cherish his father's memory, he would make a dash to his village. He was fond of cultivating sugarcane and ploughing the land, he was also fond of his two sisters.

After having lit the fire I was badly haunted by my dad's memories. I had fought hard with my tears eager to bubble out, but I was completely overwhelmed by emotions after listening to the Vedic mantras. Misra Sir had shadowed me after my father's death. When he gave an English rendering of one hymn I burst into tears.

Only seven or eight hundred mourners were lingering now at the cremation ground though a great many people had turned up to pay their last respects to my dad. My family enjoyed the love and respect of the entire locality both among the tribals and the plainspeople. But we were all fed up with our two uncles and our cousins. That was the reason why we did not give our elder sisters to our cousins in marriage. (The Hindu tribals of the Northeast have a custom of marrying the maternal uncle's daughter like the South Indian Hindus). Before the marriage of the remaining sisters of mine they had bagged two Naga brides from Dimapur who had brought a fortune to their house. Both Naga girls were embodiments of culture and they had gracefully adapted themselves to the Hindu customs. But my mother, my sisters, my wife and myself were fed up with Nupu and Hukur Sing and their caddish ways. In our Karbi society a Mama is the most revered person and after becoming a father-in-law he becomes more revered than even God. But, my cousins proved to be an exception to this rule.

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My cousins did not allow themselves to be affected in any way after their Mama's death. There was absolutely no sign of grief or loss written on their faces. After having emptied all the bottles they picked up a bitter quarrel with Tarachand Uncle. He was a sober and wise person most unwilling to create any scene at the cremation ground. But, he was virtually waylaid by Hukur Sing.

'Baranwal, how do you have the audacity to say that drinking is undesirable at a funeral? Why do you refuse to see how we have drenched our Mama in wine? We offer so many things like shoes, umbrellas, wine and clothes to the dead so that they may get all these things in heaven too after this life. But have you ever realized that all these things are futile without laughter? Hence our laughter and this will contribute to his happiness.' They were using "thou" for our uncle and their tone was very rude.

Tarachand Uncle was put out of his countenance at this behaviour. He had a terrific moral influence in the village. Besides being a successful businessman, he was also a good social worker eager to share the grief and happiness of the village. He was my father's bosom friend and hated the idea that his nephews should guffaw like ghouls at the funeral.

Till the eighties of the last century the tribal young men used to be all respect to the elderly. The senior citizens did not hesitate to thrash even young boys who were complete strangers if the latter were caught on the wrong foot. But the old and the elderly were pushed to the wall after the politicians had begun to drag adolescent boys and girls into active politics. The elderly Karbis of our locality were sulking at the demeanour of my cousins. But they were keen to keep their mouth shut. Nupu was a greater cad than Hukur Sing. He accosted Tara uncle and clutching his hand he ejaculated, "Taraji, these four Karbi Christian priests are making themselves perfect clowns by refraining from drinking. Do you mean to say that the Christians do not drink at the funeral? Have you read O' Connor's story *The Drunkard?* Father and son are attending a funeral. The minor son furtively empties the glass of wine meant for the father. These blasted Christians in their black suits and red Bibles are playing archangels. But we cannot be cheated so easily. What do you say in Hindi—*Sau Sau chuhe khake bili Haj ko chali*—the cat is on the way to the pilgrimage after devouring hundreds of rats?"

After this both brothers burst into a ghoulish laughter so much so that nearly thirty-forty mourners who were busy guzzling were swept off their feet and began to giggle. Their guffaw appeared to be like the laugh of the ghouls who are supposed to drink the blood of the dead. Misra Sir rose to the occasion and consoled me, "Just ignore these

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fellows, Ajut. Ghouls laugh only when the decadence sets in before the culture begins." After that guffaw there prevailed silence all around the cremation ground. The elders had an experience of *shmashan-vairagya* (asceticism at the cremation ground) and the young shocked with a sense of shame fell silent. When we were about to leave we could not spot the dazzling, brand new Icon car of my cousins. I apologised to Tara Uncle and we returned home.

My two sisters were holding my mother in their arms. Despite tiffs my parents loved each other. She was unable to stand the shock of his demise. Defying the traditions of an orthodox Brahmin family she had married my father. But, all was lost for her now.

I was suddenly startled by the loud sound of the television. Some one was singing jazz. Nupu was repeating the song and Hukur Sing was dancing to his tune.

"Do you watch the turmoil and the din your brothers are raising? Nobody will testify that they have returned after the cremation of their maternal uncle." Tara uncle's wife was mortally offended by the behaviour of my cousins.

It was Nupu who flew into a mad rage at this observation.

"Arrey, it is this old hag who had kept my Mama provoked against us. We are tribals. We hate acting and crying just for the sake of crying. That Tiwadi fellow who has spent as many as twenty bottles of whisky on our guests is far better than you people . He brought an entire truckful of firewood for burning the dead body besides." Now it was impossible on my part to keep my mouth shut. "Nupu Da, watch your language and watch your behaviour." I put in an ice-cold voice.

I could still hear the devilish laughter of Hukur Sing. As he emerged from inside I showed both the brothers the gate of my house.

"O.K., O.K., sahib bahadur, we are leaving." Both brothers responded spontaneously. Then they burst out laughing with all their might. They opened the gate and hurried towards the car. After a pause they turned towards me and guffawed after gesticulating wildly at me. They did appear slightly shamefaced, but they were unable to control their laughter. As I have narrated already my both cousins were as handsome as Danny Dengjompa, but their sky-rending laughter had made their faces look utterly ugly. My sisters took me inside the house, but their ghoulish laughter reverberated there too. It kept on assailing my ears till I heard the horn of the Icon car.

Translated from Hindi by Ravi Kumar Singh

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Tiruvaalangadu Padigam: Ten Verses on Tiruvaalangadu by Karaikkal Ammaiyar

H.S. Shiva Prakash

Tiruvaalangadu is the site of one of the most celebrated Shiva temples of Tamilnadu. According to the legend, this is the place where Shiva performed a particular kind of Tandava called 'Urdhava Tandava'. It is said that Shiva and his consort Kali once entered into a dance contest. Though the contest lasted for long, neither of them lost or won. Shiva then decided to perform a Tandava dance with his leg raised straight up perpendicularly and challenged Kali to perform the same feat. Kali was unwilling to do so out of womanly modesty. This is how Shiva won the contest. The temple of Tiruvaalangadu bears testimony to this famous legend. Karaikkal Ammaiyar is said to have composed two decads in praise of the Lord dwelling in Tiruvaalangadu.

Barring Avvaiyar, Karaikkal Ammaiyar is the oldest known Tamil woman poet. Her period is believed to have been 5 Century A.D. Karaikkal is a sea-shore town close to Nagapattinam, where once upon a time lived a rich merchant called Paramchittan with his chaste and beautiful wife Punitavathi. Their married life was heaven on earth. An unexpected event changed it all. One day some strangers gave Paramchittan two mangoes of the rarest quality at his place of work, which he promptly sent home to his wife. Soon afterwards a Shaivite mendicant appeared at her door for alms. Punitavathi had not yet completed her cooking, but the mendicant was extremely hungry. She served him one of the mangoes sent by her husband, thinking that it was her share. When the husband returned home and sat down for a meal, she served him the remaining mango. Its taste was beyond compare. The husband asked for the other mango also. At a loss, Punitavathi prayed to Lord Shiva to send another mango of the same quality. The prayer was fulfilled!

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Another mango descended. Punitavathi served it to her husband. The husband found that the second mango was incomparably superior to the first one. He felt it could not be the same mango that he had sent. On being asked where it came from, Punitavathi told him the whole story. From that moment on Paramchittan began to look up to his wife. His heart was filled with reverence and awe. Unable to carry on with normal marital life with her, he went to another town and took another wife. With this Punitavathi's married life came to an end. Punitavathi then became a devotee of Shiva going from temple to temple and singing the Lord's glory. She was often troubled and waylaid by men who were bewitched by her beauty. To ward this off, she prayed to the Lord to make her ugly like a ghoul. The Lord again granted her prayer. He conferred on her the most terrible form which would keep men away. She later came to be known as Pey Nayanmar – a ghoul-like saint. She came to be known as Karaikkal Ammaiyar–the Holy Mother of Karaikkal — whose life, more or less as summed up above, was later recounted by the Tamil bhakti poet Sekkizhaar in *Periya Puranam* and by the Kannada poet Harihara in *Karaikkal Ammayarara Ragale* in eleventh and thirteenth centuries respectively.

Undoubtedly one of the three great Shaivite women poets of India, she is known to be a pioneer of several styles of composition that were to become popular with both Shaivite and Vaishanavite Tamil poets. It is as if she bridges ancient Tamil culture with the later bhakti culture. The forms like *patikam* (decad), *antati* (sequence of devotional poems), and *manimalai* (garland of poems) are said to have been popularized by her. Though she is not considered as one of 'First Three' of Shaivite poets she was a precursor of the great efflorescence of Shaivite poetry (circa. 6 to 8 century A.D.).

Her vision of Shiva is different from that of the other two Shaivite women poets, Akka (12th century) and Lalleshwari (14th Century). Akka's vachanas of devotional love are built around the image of Shiva as the Handsome one. The modifier 'Chenna' prefixed to her 'Ankita' (Chennamallikarjuna) means just this. Lalleshwari's vision of Shiva is more philosophical and formless. By contrast, Karaikkal Ammaiyar presents a vision of Shiva as 'The Terrible One,' particularly in the two decads translated here. Both the poems are littered with hideous images associated with cremation grounds. But a terrible beauty of a different kind is suggested by these very images. Also, a sense of freedom and joy hidden in frightening sounds and sights of the cremation grounds is expressed in the dance of Shiva as dramatized by the poem.

These poems contain some very interesting details concerning the

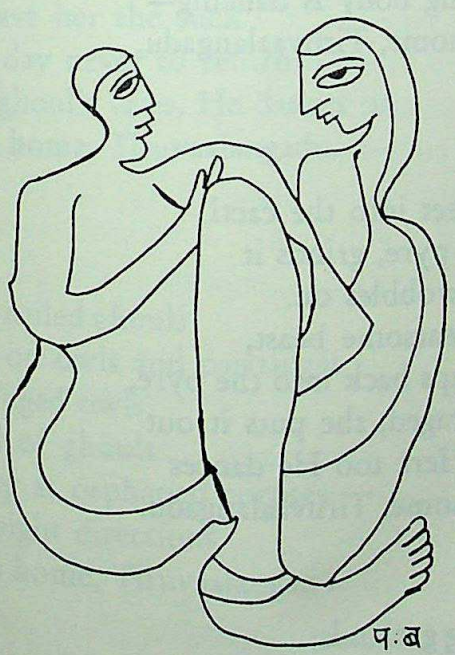
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cultural life of the Tamil land of the ancient period. It speaks of dances and movements named in the poem but are no more extant. Equally interesting is the mention of 'kol' as the first note, pointing to the existence of a different kind of music.

Both the decads conclude with 'Phalashruti', a statement of the benefits of reciting the poem. One of them assures Shiva's grace to whoever sings and dances these verses, hinting at the possibility that these poems were meant for a song and dance performance.

A word about the translation. An attempt is made to keep to the rhythm of the source text in which one hears the intoxicating drum beats of Shiva's 'damaru' and the kinetic aspect of the imagery is also retained. Whichever words do not have an English counterpart are transliterated. The text is taken from the Tamil original in the *Hymns of Karaikkal Ammaiyar* (tr.- T.N. Ramachandran) published by IISSR Dharmapuram, Mayiladuthurai, Tamilnadu, in 1993.

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Karaikkal Ammaiyar

Verses On Tiruvaalangadu

Part One

1
Sagging breasts; swollen veins;
A skeleton with a pair of sunken eyes;
Blood-red gums; teeth jutting out:
A long-ankled she-demon dwells
In a wilderness—where,
His matted hair scattered in all directions
His fiery but cooling body is dancing—
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

2
A ghoul puts her feet into the cacti,
Picks up a burning pyre, grinds it
Into eyeshade and wobbles on.
At the sight of a fearsome beast,
Frightened, she jumps back into the pyre,
But, singed and enraged, she puts it out
By pouring ashes. Here too He dances
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

3
Vaikai beads' jingling garlands;
In the terrible gloom of the dead of the night,
The owl's hoot! Andalai's song!
Horned owls leap back to branches
In cacti's shade entwined with *indai*

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Look! A burning row of pyres!
How cool but fiery His dancing body!
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

4
Seeing foxes grabbing rice grains
From fire-pits and eating,
Clapping their hands, ghouls scream:
"Foxes have got it. Why not we?"
A hullabaloo, running amuck
In such ghastly places, He dances on,
His left foot up, touching the sky
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

5
After devouring thick marrow,
A garland of white skulls round her neck,
A ghoul named her baby Kali,
Brought her up with great affection,
Dusted her off, gave her the suck
But vanished one day never to return
Amidst the baby ghoul's cries, He dances on
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

6
Cleft-footed, long-nailed ghouls
Feed their young on owls and partridges
The egg-laying winged owls,
Foxes and hordes of ghouls
Turn over and tug at orphaned corpses
He dances on in eight directions
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

7
Rolling-eyed and flame-mouthed,
Dancing *tungakam*, running about,

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Ghouls lift up roasting corpses
And gobble them up. In such a place,
The jingling anklet bells!
He dances *nattinai* to their tunes,
His matted locks helter skelter
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

8

This man who went from country to city
Hunting for joy is now dead
How he sleeps next to an aged man
Covered in a shroud. Still, setting
Woods and hills, lands and seas
Spinning, our Lord dances.
Holing a torch in His raised hand
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

9

Singing songs of seven notes
In tune with *uli*, *yili* , *kakkilai*,
Charchari, *kokkilai* and hand drum
Tuganita, trumpet, cymbal, *veena*,
Madalige, garadigai, vainkai, madol
Playing on *damaru*, *kadamila* and *mandai*,
Orchestrating them all, He dances
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

10

Fools, completely out of their minds,
Carry their dead to where
Two roads meet, to perform rites
And ignite the pyre. At twilight,
The light of flames and music of gods!
The reverberating *damaru* beats!
That is my Lord's home, Tiruvaalangadu.

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Part Two

1
Where *elava, ekkai, karai*
And *surai* grow in abundance,
Where, grabbing the guts of dead ones,
Gobbling them up, surrounded
By countless corpses, ghouls,
Their eyes throbbing like drums,
Go on singing their songs,
Look! The Handsome One is dancing.

2
Where marrow melts and wet the earth,
Where ghouls with long teeth
And sunken eyes dance *tunankai*,
Extinguish blazing pyres
And gormandize corpses
To their souls content, amidst such
Joyous sports, a torch blazing in His hand,
Look! The Handsome One is dancing

3
Where jackals tug at stinking
White skulls punctured by birds
Where owls hoot, owlets spread
Their wings and barn owls look
Frightening, foxes flit about
Howling, He chooses to dance
In such a charnel house, the Lord,
Whose name is Cremation Ground.

4
Is this corpse really dead?
Testing it with his finger, the ghoul
Gives a yell and, throwing a firebrand
At it, starts to flee in terror
So do other ghouls, beating
Their bellies with bewilderment
They too take to their frightened heels

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In such a fearsome wilderness
The Supreme One goes on dancing

5
Withered *mulli*; charred wood;
Brains bursting out of skulls;
In forests filled with withered cacti
And full of wood apple trees,
With spotted antelope skin on,
And tiger's hide dangling
Down His shoulder, in such a wilderness
The Supreme One goes on dancing.

6
Where owlets of many colours
With shining and crooked beaks
Feed on skulls and brains of corpses
And go round howling,
Their hair out like toddy fronds,
The burning charcoal-eyed ghouls
Are making music with flutes
The Handsome One is dancing.

7
Scratching up charred corpses
But unable to find any flesh,
Owlets are fast asleep
Bad times for ghouls!
Ah, *muluvam* music of gods
Keeping step with its notes
Alongside the retinue of ghouls
The Handsome One is dancing.

8
Where lofty bamboos scatter pearls
Where burning dead bodies crackle
Giving out sparks, disheveled
And screaming ghouls eat

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Dead fetuses to their heart's content,
As the daughter of mountains
Is watching on,
The Great Magician is dancing

9
Where monkeys frolic about
Amidst bamboo groves,
Ghouls, eagles, white skulls
And smoke of pyres abound
As the crooked moon sways
White *tuti* and *parai* resound
Listen! *Kol*, the first note
The Supreme One is dancing

10
Sunken-bellied dwarfish ghouls,
And grown up ones with mouths of flame
Are rife in wilds drowned by *indai*
Ghouls with teeth jutting out
Are thrilled and angered by turns
Eyeing their young. Listen!
Kol, the first note. With matted hair scattered,
The Pure One is dancing.

11
Wearing the moon in the matted locks
He is dancing His spiral dance
The snake at the waist too is dancing
Whoever dances, through His Grace,
These ten verses sung by me,
Ghoul from Karai with mouth
Of fire and crooked teeth,
Will be rid of all sins.

Translated from Tamil by H.S. Shiva Prakash

Note: "He" is Lord Shiva.

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Sudhanshu Chaturvedi in Conversation with Brajendra Tripathi: Excerpts....

Brajendra Tripathi: Let me take you down memory lane to the days when you started to put your thoughts in black and white. Tell me something about those initial days.

Sudhanshu Chaturvedi: I took to writing when I was just eight years old. My first poem was titled "Hay Pareeksha." I remember the first four lines even now.

Tera ana sunkar devi
Ham kamp-kamp rah jate hain
Ye lal tamatar se chehare
Bhaya se peele pad jate hain.

This poem was widely appreciated by my friends. Later it was published in a famous Hindi weekly *Acharya*, which was edited by Raghavacharya. This was followed by many more pieces in the same weekly.

In those days I was studying in a primary school in my village Madhav Nagar. I used to take recourse to the loneliness of night, in the light of kerosene lamp, to put my thoughts down so that others won't come to know about it. They were against my literary pursuits. I also wrote a short story based on my mother's struggles in life, "Meri Maa." My literary forays found further expression in the college magazine to which I used to contribute many pieces in different names. There were not many students who were interested in writing in those days. Vidya Charan Shukla was the editor of that magazine.

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BT : Along with your original writing, you entered the field of translation. Would you elucidate that?

SC : I first ventured into the field of translation when I was a B.A. student. Apart from my literary interest, another reason was to earn some money to support my studies. Original works did not bring me much financial benefits. On the other hand, translations were financially more beneficial. In those days I was not getting any money from home to continue my studies. My first translation was a book on Russian Constitution written by Dr. P. R. Sahni which I translated into Hindi, a job I did in 15 days. He gave me a cycle, a watch and some money in recognition of my work. Then I went on to translate many more books.

I got admission to the Department of Modern Indian Languages in the Delhi University where I learnt Malayalam. In 1964, my translation of a Malayalam book *Odayil Ninnu* was published in Hindi titled *Naali Se*. It was a text book for me. Dr. K. Bhaskaran Nair, then Principal of Brennan College, Thalassery, in Kerala wrote the introduction for it. Another translation was the famous historical drama *Veluthampi Dalava* written by Kainikkara Padmanabha Pillai. The introduction for this book was written by Dr. Ratnamai Devi Dixit, wife of famous journalist Sita Charan Dixit. She is the mother of J.N. Dixit. Another translation was the famous Malayalam book *Sandhya* written by G. Sankara Kurup, the first Jnanpith Award winner. The introduction of my translation was written by Dr. Harivansh Rai Bachchan.

BT : You were a lone star in the literary horizon of Kerala in the sense that Malayalam was not your mother tongue. How did the litterateurs of that state react to it?

SC : I was in touch with several literary figures of Kerala even before I reached there. *Kerala Bharati*, a Hindi monthly published by Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha, Ernakulam, was publishing my poems, short stories and articles. I became a regular invitee to several seminars and meetings conducted by the Hindi Prachar Sabha. During those days I came in contact with many Malayalam writers who received me well and encouraged me to write original works in Malayalam along with the translation. A number of weeklies in Malayalam like *Mathrubhoomi*, *Malayala Manorama*, *Malaya Rajyam*, *Janayugam*, *Kunkumam*, *Kesari*, *Kerala Bhushanam* and so on published my original writings as well as my translations.

BT : Tell me more about your experiences in the field of translation.

SC : My most famous translation is *Himgiri Vihar* of Swami Tapovanamji

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Maharaj, guru of Swami Chinmayanand. The disciple of Swamiji, Swami Mahadev Vanam, came to the hostel of Sree Kerala Varma College, where I was the hostel warden, with the original book. He wanted me to translate the work into Malayalam. I was only 22 years old. He had come to me with the impression that I might be an old man mature enough to translate such a highly philosophical book. When he saw me, he had second thoughts. Only after engaging me in a discussion on Vedanta for over three hours, did he decide to entrust me with the work. I translated that work in six months and it was published from Delhi, which was well received. It got an award for it too.

BT : How did you come into contact with the literary personalities in Kerala and how did such meetings shape your literary journey?

SC : One of my first meetings after reaching Kerala was with the literary giant P. Keshava Dev whose *Odayil Ninnu* I had translated. I wanted to present him my work. In those days, writers used to hold meetings in Thiruvananthapuram to which I was a regular invitee. I met Shooranad Kunjan Pillai, Kainikkara Padmanabha Pillai, Kainikkara Kumara Pillai, G. Vivekanandan, P.K. Parameshwaran Nair, O.N.V. Kurup, Prof. N. Krishna Pillai, T.N. Gopinathan Nair and several other literary personalities. It was because of the loving prodding of these great men that I translated their works. During my stay in Ernakulam, I came across people like Mahakavi G. Shankara Kurup, A.D. Hari Sharma, M. K. Sanu, Parappurath, Justice V.R.Krishna Iyer, Ponkunnam Varkey, Vaikom Chandrasekharan Nair, Kambissery Karunakaran, C.N. Sreekanthan Nair and so on. In the cultural capital of Kerala - Thrissur — I befriended people like Prof. Joseph Mundassery, Puthezhathu Raman Menon, P. Narendra Nath, C. L. Jose, O.M.C. Namboothirippad and Olappamanna. In Calicut, I met K.P. Kesava Menon, Kuttikrishna Marar, N. V. Krishna Warrier, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, P.C. Kuttikrishnan 'Uroob', Akkittam Achyutan Namboothiri, Thikkodiyan, K.T. Muhammed, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, A.P.P. Namboothiri and many others. My contact with them led to the translation of many of their works, sometimes without going into the merit of the books. However, some of the works, which I translated, had received Sahitya Akademi awards. These writers wanted me to enlighten them on the history of Hindi literature and this led to my writing of *Hindi Sahitya Charitram* in Malayalam.

BT : You are both an original writer and a translator. Does the style of other writers come in the way of your translation?

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SC : My experience shows that quite often a translator would have to compromise his own style to do justice to his work. I started writing poems, then became a playwright, essayist and a critic. So whichever style that suited the translation of a particular work, it was put to use. There were occasions when I felt that I was wasting time on translation. On many occasions, I had vowed not to undertake further translation works. But, I had to renege on my vows to keep up personal relationships. I feel that original writers should not go for translations of others' works, because it brings much mental agony to them. On the contrary, I also feel that original writers should go for translation for it will enrich the literature. It is this latter mental disposition that made me undertake many works of translation.

BT : The cultures of Uttar Pradesh and Kerala are poles apart. How did you integrate this divergence in your translations?

SC : It is true that there is a vast difference in the culture and traditions of the two States. Such differences had to be clarified in foot-notes in the translations. In the case of many usage in Kerala, I had to look for similar ones in Rajasthani, Brij or Kanauji 'slangs'. In some cases I had to look into Sanskrit usages. Such difficulties arose not only in the case of words but also in idioms and phrases. I had to get to the 'soul' of both the languages.

BT : Which aspects do you specially keep in mind at the time of translation?

SC : I read the book under translation at least three times. While reading it I try to visualize the atmosphere and situation embodied in the work. I fully assimilate it. Then it undergoes a churning in the mind. It is also important to select the language and style. It is said that 'Poetry comes from the heart and goes to the heart'. I fully apply this saying to all fields of literature. It is my effort to see that there is absolutely no difference between the translation and the original work. But it has never been possible to bring out a translation which is absolutely similar to the original work. Usually I leave the translation work for six months after its completion. Then I go through my work again and give the final touches. This helps me to remove the inaccuracies in the translation. There had been occasions I had to go for a total rewriting. Such Herculean efforts are needed to bring out a translation which does utmost justice to the original work, though many translators do not take such pain and still such works get published.

BT : Which was your most challenging work of translation?

SC : The most challenging translation work was that of *Kayar*. For, its

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language was one used in Kuttanad, mostly in Alappuzha District, Kerala some 150 years back. Many of its words are no more in use in Malayalam. The meanings of many words have also undergone a sea change. My effort was all the more challenging because four authors had earlier tried their hands at it, but were not appreciated. They were all eminent translators. It was then that I came into the picture. I took almost 10 months to complete the work of about 1200 pages.

In poetry, the translation of Kumaran Asan's *Chintavishtayaya Sita* was the most challenging one. For, the then Governor had announced an award for its translation and 44 people had undertaken the job. However, none of them was found eligible for the award. First I transliterated it into Hindi and read it once again. After a lot of contemplation, I did its translation into prose and then into verse. It was my intention that I should translate it into the same 'Viyogini' metre which was used in the original poem. I was in Lucknow at that time. I once saw in my dream that I had translated it into Hindi in 'Viyogini' metre itself and I was reading it out before my friends who were praising it highly. It was 2.30 a.m. I got up immediately, had my bath and meditated for sometime. Then I started the translation work and in three days I completed it. I handed over the translation to Dr. Prem Narayan Tandon, editor of *Rasvanti*, saying: "If you find it good you may serialize it in your magazine. He liked it and published it in *Rasvanti*. Later it was published under the title *Tyakta Ke Ansu* by Hindi Sahitya Bhanadar with the introduction of the renowned poet Dr. Puttulal Shukla 'Chandrakar'.

BT : You have translated both prose and poetry. What is the difference in both the experiences?

SC : One cannot do full justice to translation of poetry. For it is not easy for the translator to enter into the poet's mind and soul and reproduce it in the same spirit. Sometimes the translation could be better than the original work. But there is the danger that translation could deviate from the core of the original. In Malayalam, there are 32 translations of Kalidasa's *Abhinjana Shakuntalam*. But none is fully successful. Vallathol's translation in certain aspects is better than the original, but it has deviated from the original. The translation by A. R. Raja Raja Varma is also pretty good. What I did was to translate Kalidasa's work in prose, giving the original text alongside the translation. But I am fully satisfied with my translation of Kumaran Asan's *Chinthavishtayaya Sita*. For, I am a poet too and I could get

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to the core of the original poetry.

BT : What makes a good translator? Is it enough to have knowledge of two languages or does it require more training?

SC : One should have meticulous knowledge of the language in which one is translating a work. One should also have deep knowledge of the language of the original work. Translation is devotion. If one goes by monetary considerations alone, one will end up a total failure. Such translations will not take one anywhere. A translator should be involved in his work both mentally and physically. That makes one a successful translator.

As far as training is concerned, it is a matter of formality. I would say that one needs more practice than training. If training is given to a translator by people who have only theoretical knowledge, it is of little help to anyone. But, if the training is imparted by those who have practical knowledge, it can go a long way in boosting the translators' ability.

BT : How satisfied are you with your role as a translator?

SC : I always feel that I should do better than I have done so far. This is true not only as a translator but also as an original writer. I have been showered with praises for my work in translation. There had been special adulation for my works of translation into Malayalam from Hindi, Sanskrit and English. I am overwhelmed when I am called the '*Manasputra* of Malayalam'. Moreover, some of my works had been overwhelmingly received by the readers. The 1200-page *Kalidasasarvaswom* has gone into third edition. The Malayalam translation of *Amrit Aur Vish* too has seen three editions. These are the fruits of my dedication and devotion to work for over 38 years. Like Beeshma Pithamah, I was on the bed of arrows for all these years. The sole aim of this hard and consistent work has been to remove the stain of allegation against the people of North India that they are not interested in learning South Indian languages. I have proved them wrong. I have got an award for my work in Malayalam. It is for the first time that a North Indian has bagged an award for his original work in Malayalam.

BT : What was the status of Hindi awareness campaigns in those days in Kerala?

SC : Before I reached Kerala, people like Pandit Harihar Sharma, Pandit Devdhoot Vidhyarthi, Devdas Gandhi and so on had done commendable work in this field. When I reached there in 1964, some people could understand and speak Hindi. I travelled the length and breadth of Kerala and gave speeches in Hindi and I did not

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face any difficulty. People loved Hindi and they were filled with national pride. If one reads the writings of Vallathol and Kumaran Asan, they are oozing with nationalisst sentiment. But in course of time, Keralites got the wrong impression that Hindi was being imposed on them. It became a political issue and anti-Hindi sentiments began to run high. As the anti-Hindi movement picked up momentum, some people advised me to leave the State. There were reports that some people had been burnt alive in Madras where anti-Hindi movement was at its peak. I used to tell those who advised me to leave Kerala, "I have come here to serve Malayalam, and not to propagate Hindi. I am willing to die for the cause." People slowly respected my intention. I made it a point to speak Malayalam at all times. I also think that if there hadn't been any initiative at the government-level to propagate Hindi, it would have developed much faster. The people saw red in the government-level initiative to propagate Hindi. Even now there is some resistance to Hindi in the State. I too had to face the wrath of some people in Kerala. But, since I was engaged in work related to Malayalam, my critics could not do much harm to me.

BT : During the Freedom Movement, all the non-Hindi speaking leaders had supported the cause of Hindi. Among the top non-Hindi speaking leaders were Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, Dayanand Saraswati, Subhash Chandra Bose, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel and Vinoba Bhave. But post-Independence, most non-Hindi speaking people turned anti-Hindi proponents. How did this turn around happen?

SC : It is true that during the freedom struggle all people supported Hindi with 'one mind and soul'. I feel that the 15-year transition period given for English was wrong. During this period we did not try to implement Hindi in its totality. There was no need for the government to take any lead in this matter. It should have been a people's initiative. On the other hand, the government's involvement gave a political colour to the whole issue. Pandit Nehru's role in the whole episode was less than praiseworthy; rather it complicated the issue. His statement that Hindi would not be imposed on non-Hindi speaking people till such time they themselves are ready for it was the last nail struck on the issue. We were to bid farewell to the use of English in 1965. But, it did not happen. If the Centre wanted, it could do so by bringing in legislation in this regard.

The Keralites have no problem with Hindi literature, Hindi songs

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or Hindi movies. But, they say they don't want to use it as a working language. For, they think that Hindi is being imposed on them, which they want to resist at any cost. But they should realise that they will have to accept it as a working language one day or the other.

BT : How do you rate the role of translation in the contemporary situation?

SC : Translation has a major role to play in the contemporary life. There are innumerable languages in the world. If one wants to relate oneself with them, translation is the only bridge with them. The same is the case with the Indian languages.

There are a lot of similarities among the Indian languages – whether they are Aryan or Dravidian languages. It is only through translation that we understand this. Hindi translation is the best medium to link these languages.

BT : Now let us discuss your original writings. You said that at the age of eight years you had written your first poem 'Hai Pareeksha'. But which is your first published work?

SC : I wrote an essay titled 'Kalpana' at the age of 12. This was my first published piece. The next work was 'Sumananjali' which I wrote when I was 17 years old and a B.A. student. The next year I published three books on Kalidasa – *Kalidas, Kalidas Aur Unka Meghadoot* and *Meghadoot*. In *Meghadoot*, along with the original text, I had given the Hindi and English translations. It had footnotes too. Many editions of this book have been published. Later, one edition was published with Hindi translation alone. At the age of 20 I had published *Shakuntala Natak: Ek Anuseelan*.

Regal Book Depot in Delhi was known for publishing notes for students. My teacher Bharat Bhushan Saroj was well-known for writing notes. But, I stood firm that I would not change my book *Shakuntala Natak: Ek Anuseelan* into notes – question-answer form. So the book was not published for six months. But, later it was published with the introduction by noted critic and Reader in Delhi University Dr. Udaya Bhanu Singh.

Immediately after this, the book edited by me, *Shakuntala Natak* of Raja Laxman Singh, was published by the same publisher. It had my introduction, comparative studies and notes. Many editions of this book have come out. At the same time, my *Sankshiptam Balakandam* was published by Motilal Banarasi Das which was a prescribed text for B. A. and B.A. (Hons) and many editions were published. During the same period, a collection of my essays titled *Nibandh Bharati* was also published.

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In 1966 three books were published – *Jaago Phir Ek Bar* (collection of my radio talks and poems), *Dukh Ki Dhup: Sukh Ki Varsha* (children's novel) and *Kalpana* (second edition).

BT : You wrote *Kalpana* when you were still a child. At that age one does not have matured experiences. What was the background of *Kalpana*?

SC : This book is based on a true incident in life and its heroine Kalpana is not an imaginary figure. She was a living figure who created waves in my life. I also wove national feelings into the theme. In those days I was writing patriotic poems. Some excerpts of such poems are also included in this novel. Actually I am the hero of the story. But in her I gave life to my inner feelings and wove the outlines of the plot around it.

BT : How far were you acceptable in the horizon of Hindi literature? Are you satisfied with that?

SC : I had left the Hindi belt at the age of 21. The works I have published till then were not very well-known. The publishers too were not so well-known. Only those books are discussed in which the writer himself is involved. Since I was not much involved and having no group of my own, my books were not highlighted in those days.

After reaching Kerala I wrote a novel *Apnom Ke Beech* which was serialised in *Rasvanti*. I wrote in its preface:

Lo Apno Ke Beech Samarpit Tum Sa Apna Kaun?
Tum Prasann Ho Isase Badkar Sundar Sapana Kaun?

This was followed by another novel *Hum Bhi Insan Hei* based on the atrocities on the 'untouchables'. Its foreword was written by Amrit Lal Nagar. The next fictions were *Atmahatya* and *Sasikant*.

BT : There aren't many Hindi-speaking people who have gone to the far-off States in the South, learned the languages, become renowned writers and translators in the regional languages winning Akademi awards. But, you have proved that you could do it. Now, tell me what are your contributions to Malayalam language and literature?

SC : I have written five novels in Malayalam – *Nadi Samudratilekkutanne, Janmantaram, Chinnichitariya Mohangal, Teera Bhoomi, Antyaabhilaksham* – which have been widely discussed there. All of them have seen two editions each.

Initially I used to write poetry in Hindi. These used to be broadcast on All India Radio. One of them had become very popular. Later I realised that the era of poetry was over. I did not publish any

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collection of poetry after *Sumananjali*. But the poet in me refused to sit idle. It was difficult to pen such poetry in Malayalam. So I wrote a song "Bade Chalo He Hind Veer". After that the age of songs was over. In those days I wrote a song beginning:

In Geetom Ka Sab Raag Betuka Hai Behad
Sab Kahate Hain Ab Kavita Likhna Band Karo

After *Sumananjali*, no collection of Hindi poems was published. So when I was restless, I used to write Malayalam poems. One such collection of poetry – *Kavithayude Kallukal* – was published. Noted Malayalam litterateur Kalppatta Balakrishnan wrote an eight-page introduction to this book.

Wherever I stayed, I always kept aloof from any groups – literary or political. I confined myself to the realm of literature.

BT : In Kerala, along with teaching, you were involved in publishing also. You also purchased a printing press. It is not an easy task for an ordinary mortal. But you did it despite the fact that you had reached there from north India. What was your experience in that field?

SC : I set up Bharatiya Sahitya Samiti in Trisshur. I published 35 books of various Malayalam writers under its auspices. I had organised a three-day function in connection with the release of these books. Later, I started Sudha Publications. I brought out six children's books from there. This was followed by four fictions and the Malayalam translation of *Amrit Aur Vish*. Other translations were Yash Pal's *Barah Ghantte* and *Kyom Phanse* and Chiranjit's *Tasvir Uski*. *Kalidasasarvaswom* in two parts was also brought out from here. It was released by Prof. Sidheshwar Prasad at a function in Trissur in 1975. It is significant to note here that when I had published my book Kalidasan Oru Padhanam, seven years prior to this publication, a noted publisher of that time, Thomas, who was the son of Professor Joseph Mundassery, had stated that a north Indian had no right to write in Malayalam. He had also warned that the book would be burnt. But such threats had no impact. Bharatiya Sahitya Samiti had published that book along with 34 books in other languages. Four editions of this book had come out till date. Many universities have included it as a reference book.

I had mentioned in *Kalidasan Oru Padhanam* that this is only a mini version of the book I wanted to write on Kalidasa. When Prof. Sidheswar Prasad had handed over a copy of *Kalidasasarvaswom* to Dr. K.P. Narayana Pisharody, he had made a mention of this

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incident. Its introduction was written by noted scholar and writer Padmabhushan Sooranattu Kunjan Pillai. Most of its copies were sold through the State and Central governments. It was priced at Rs. 100/-. Sukumar Azhikode had mentioned then that none would buy the book for such a hefty price. However, after one advertisement, all copies were sold out at a pre-publication rate of Rs. 60/-. It was a rare book with original Sanskrit text and Prakrit text translated in verse. At that time another book on Kalidas - *Kalidasa Kritikal* - edited by N. V. Krishna Warrior was brought out. But it did not sell well. Sri Warrior was the editor of *Kunkumam Weekly* and he had written a critical appreciation in it on *Kalidasasarvaswom*. Then its second edition came out and its introduction was written by Sukumar Azhikode.

When *Kalidasa Kritikal* was published, I had told Warrior that such a betrayal should not have been done. He revealed to me that because of the wide demand for my book, he was forced by people to bring out the book. The second edition of my book was brought out by Padmabhushan D.C. Kizhakkemury who suggested to me to bring out an edition of *Kalidasasarvaswom* by Current Books. I told him that I am agreeable to the suggestion provided he was willing to bring out *Bhasanatakasarvaswom* along with *Kalidasasarvaswom*. The former had 1200 pages. Those days the financial position of Current Books was not very sound. He told me that he was not in a position to publish such a large book. Later D. C. agreed to the proposal. The book was limited to 1000 pages as small fonts were used. Then Current Books told me that they had already advertised the pages as 1200. So I had to write 200 pages of appendices. Dramas of Bhasa were staged in the form of Kootiyattam in Kerala. When I wrote 50 pages on Kootiyattam and sent it to Current Books they wrote me back saying they are unable to add any more pages. Their plea was that the book may not find much demand. But the fact was that the book was sold out even before it was printed. Later I got many letters seeking more copies, but the book had gone out of print. I even got a request for the book from the then Chief Secretary C. P. Nair, but I did not have a single copy with me. Later D. C. managed to send a copy to him. The introduction to the first edition of *Bhasanatakasarvaswom* was written by O. M. Anujan. The second edition's introduction was penned by K.P. Narayana Pisharody. It was published in 2001.

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BT: Now you are free from holding any post. There are not anymore any bindings on you. Even at your age, you work like any young man with energy and dynamism. What are your plans for the future?

SC: After retirement from the post of Principal, I had many good offers. But I did not take up any of them. I feel that whatever I wanted to give for literature, I have not been able to fulfill. So, after retirement, on the occasion of the golden jubilee celebration of the Geeta Private Limited, I brought out a collection of 50 Malayalam books. There are many unpublished works of mine in Hindi, Sanskrit and Malayalam. First of all I want to publish all of them. After that there are some other projects that I want to undertake.

One such project is the publication of *Valmiki Ramayan* in all the Indian languages. There are only 6666 slokas instead of the 24,000 in the *Valmiki Ramayan* I have abridged. There is no break in the continuity of the theme. I want this to be published in all Indian languages. Also I want the complete works of Kalidas and Bhasa to be brought out in all the Indian languages.

There is one thing that keeps my mind troubled—that although we give all facilities to the young generation, but they are not being given the lessons on our culture. Hence they lack self-confidence. I have written 23 children's books in Malayalam. I have plans to publish more books on our language, culture and achievements. I also want such books to be published with the help of pictures and caricastures in all Indian languages. There is also need to come out with multi-lingual dictionaries. Till now I have published two dictionaries – *Hindi-Hindi-Malayalam* and *Malayalam-Malayalam-Hindi*. There is also a small dictionary – *English-Hindi-Malayalam*.

My last desire is to set up a 'Self-realisation Foundation'. I am preparing the outlines of it. Its aim is to bring to light the traditions from the Vedic era to the modern times. The thoughts and ideology of the Rishis should find way to the present generation. Man must live like man and his only mission must be 'Self-realisation and betterment of the world'.

Translated from Hindi by Marydas John

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Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers*

Raihan Raza

The relationship between man and nature, one of the oldest and grandest of literary themes, is explored by Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers*. The benevolence as well as the malevolence of nature stands contrasted and highlighted. Man's determination to succeed, in spite of all odds being against him, is also focussed upon. Though man does triumph over nature, usually due to his sustained effort over a long period of time, but nature has the power to obliterate all that he has achieved in a twinkle. So mighty is nature that not only does man lose everything in one stroke, but his life too stands threatened by those very forces that had sustained him. The novel delves deep into the benevolence as well as the malevolence of both, nature as well as human nature, by depicting the lives of Muslim farmers and peasants that live on the banks of the river Padma in the then East Bengal, with the "authenticity of an insider".(Naik, 174)

Humayun Kabir uses an impersonal narrative style by and large in this novel but is authorially omniscient, revealing the innermost thoughts and feelings of his characters. *Men and Rivers* is divided into three parts and these are further divided into chapters. The protagonist of the novel is Malek, a young boy who is nine years old when the novel begins. However, the tale is introduced from the point of view of Malek's father Nazu Mia. Part one firmly grounds the reader into the kind of man Nazu Mia is, his socio-economic, cultural and religious background is deftly revealed. When the novel begins, Nazu Mia stands on the bank of the river Padma in splendid isolation, ruminating:

> Nazu Mia breathed a sigh of relief and thankfulness. Allah was merciful and he had prospered. He remembered the days when, a young working lad, he first

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> came to the unsettled banks of the Padma. He had come with a group of older men. Peasants without any land of their own, they worked wherever they could. Often they travelled hundreds of miles in search of work.(5)

This was how things were when he first came to the banks of the Padma as a young, sixteen-year-old boy. They gained a foothold in the wilderness, on almost virgin soil by their hard work and enterprise. A settlement was eventually established due to this influx of immigrants. They succeeded in taming the land, but the river Padma remained its untamed moody self. Nazu Mia himself worked hard and Allah had been merciful and now he acknowledges that ". . . Allah had blessed his labours and today he had land and men and money, and honour in the eyes of his neighbours?"(8) Right from the outset of the story, and till the end, one character after another exhibits a sense of kinship and union with nature. In the introduction to the first part Nazu Mia compares his life to the Padma and is inspired by the river:

> No, those days were gone, gone beyond recall. The mad days of golden youth and the moments that crowd upon one another with excruciating joy. Now life was quiet and placid like the Padma on this fine morning in the late autumn. Something of the splendour of the rains still clung to her but the wildness and frenzy had gone. His life would henceforth be like this, full of kindliness but without the torrents and eddies of cruelty, suspicion and jealousy.
>
> Nazu Mia's heart filled with a sense of peace and gladness as he looked at the broad, placid river. He loved her with almost a physical passion as he remembered the days he had passed with her. His life was wedded to hers . . .(6)

Nazu Mia could not know it at this juncture, but not only was he wedded to river Padma in life but also in death, since later he met his end by drowning in this very river.

The life of Nazu Mia as well as that of all the other residents of the area largely depends on the river Padma and the land around it. Farming and fishing are their chief occupation. Right from the outset, Nazu Mia emerges as a man of principles. When a crocodile gets caught in his young son's fishing line and his mother Ayesha tries to dissuade him from going out in a boat in order to harpoon it, suggesting that

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he send some one who is younger and stronger than him, he refuses to expose his workers to dangers that he did not dare face himself:

> If you tell me not to go, I won't go; but then I can never face these men again. They call me *Panchayat* and the whole village follows my lead. If it is once known that I sent others where I did not dare to go myself, will my face remain?(12-13)

Though he is of humble origins, Nazu Mia is a man with a sense of honour. He is ambitious and it is his hard work and ambition which have spurred him to wealth and power. Not only does he own acres of land, but is respected as well, by his workers as well as the rest of the village. He is the "acknowledged leader" (19) of "his locality" (19) and has been elected *Panchayat*. Early in the novel we learn that Nazu Mia is extremely jealous of one Asgar Mia who was once his "dearest friend" (8). So jealous is Nazu Mia of Asgar Mia that he even wonders why God almighty should be equally merciful to all?

> Allah was merciful but why should his mercy extend equally to all? In his own fields a happy harvest smiled, but the pleasure at the thought was almost spoiled when he remembered the bumper crop expected by his rival and enemy.(8)

Nazu Mia's fields are separated from those of Asgar Mia by a canal. This canal it seems serves not only as a physical border or division between the land of these two men, but as an emotional one as well.

A significant feature of village life that is very aptly described is the *haat* or weekly market at Dhuldi. It is "the centre of village life for miles around" (17). It functions not only as a market but also as the centre of all kinds of information and news that would be spread by word of mouth, at a very fast pace. That there would be all sorts of exaggerations and distortions is another hallmark of the conversation that is indulged in at this *haat*:

> Nazu Mia was not surprised when he learnt at Dhuldi that his young son, Malek, a lad of ten, had fought single-handed against a monster crocodile of full twenty feet and despatched it with a harpoon that clove through its brain at one stroke. (17)

A Hakim's shop is also situated at Dhuldi. There is a signboard

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outside this shop which displays his name, though most of his patients are unlettered. The Hakim is respected for his learning though people laugh at the stories circulated about him by sceptics. The villagers come to him seeking a cure for all sorts of ailments. He prescribes a great variety of medicines which include pills, magic water and verses from the holy Quran. Inside the shop, in keeping with the life style of Hakims of the day is a platform covered with a white cloth called a *farash*. There are cushions on this *farash*. The Hakim reclines on them while waiting for his patients, smoking a hurdy-gurdy. An incident that brings out Nazu Mia's character happens in this very shop. On one of the days of this *haat* the Hakim calls Nazu Mia to his shop with great eagerness and requests him to sit on the *farash*. This is indeed an honour since he had never been seated on the *farash* before, though he had visited the Hakim's shop quite often. Nazu Mia is also offered first use of the hurdy-gurdy or *hookah* as a mark of respect. Soon Nazu Mia learns the reason for all this honour being heaped on him. The Hakim wants the spleen of the crocodile killed by Nazu Mia. In their system of medicine, the crocodile's spleen could cure rheumatism and gout and general debility. A medicine prepared from it could make one "feel twenty years younger" (20). He also requests for the crocodiles liver, since it increased "strength and courage" (20). But Nazu Mia informs him that the entire body of the crocodile except the skin, teeth and claws was thrown into the river. On learning this, all the good manners and respect that the Hakim had shown to Nazu Mia vanish. It was all just a facade to get what he wanted from Nazu Mia. So disappointed is the Hakim that he wants to insult Nazu Mia some-how or the other. First he points out that Nazu Mia's feet are unshod and he should wear shoes. But this does not have the desired impact so the Hakim without mincing words says that Nazu Mia should wash his feet when he is asked to sit on a gentleman's *farash*. This time the Hakim manages to hit the nail on the head and Nazu Mia feels insulted. In a cold manner, keeping a check on his temper, Nazu Mia retorts: "I am a peasant's son and don't know the manners of gentlemen. But we peasants never invite a man and then insult him in our house. Good, bye."(22) This incident exposes the cunning, the greed and bad manners of one who calls himself a gentleman. Comparatively speaking Nazu Mia, the uneducated peasant emerges taller and more of a gentleman than the Hakim.

The world of *Men and Rivers* is untouched by today's technology, perversity, cunning and complicated theorizing. In all pre-modern societies like this one, religion, superstition and tradition form the basis of social

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life. This is true of the society portrayed in this novel as well. Dhuldi being the centre of village life in the area becomes the chosen home of a, Faqir who establishes his residence under a large banyan tree which is hollow in the centre. There is a vivid description of the Faqir and the crowd that gathers around him:

> There the Faqir had built his den and sat in saffron robes. He wore a green turban to indicate that he was a *Saiyed*,— one who claimed descent from the holy Prophet himself. He sat on a small mat and silently told his beads or a *tasbih*. A crowd of idlers – some young, some old, with a sprinkling of women among them – stood in a circle around his den. They nudged one another, and whispered in excitement. They wanted to ask the Faqir questions about their troubles and their future, but nobody dared to disturb him.(24)

Then, an old woman gathering sufficient courage asks the Faqir if she might ask a question? To the utter amazement and thrill of the assembled uneducated villagers the Faqir voices the question which the old woman had not even uttered as yet. At this, the old woman flings herself at the Faqir's feet in reverence, asking a number of questions about her lost son Mati. Deftly, the Faqir gives her answers which could not be proved wrong, avoiding and refusing to answer questions that require exact answers:

> 'When will he come?' asked the old woman eagerly, but the Faqir had already turned to another man who was frantically trying to catch his eye. The old woman would not give up so easily and kept clamouring for a reply. The Faqir turned severely on her and said, 'Don't seek to know too much. Knowledge is the cause of misery. At times a glimpse of the future is vouchsafed to the holy man. Do not try to lift the veil higher than you can bear. Who am I to tell you of your son's fate?(24 - 25)

Catering to the universal weakness of man to remain young, forever, the Faqir promises to help an old man regain his lost vitality. Consequently the young men disdain him. But the Faqir succeeds in winning the trust of the older men and women who are present. Soon the news spreads that "a Faqir with miraculous powers had come to the *haat*." It is made clear by the omniscient narrator that the Faqir very cleverly gleans whatever information he requires, from the crowd around him and uses it to the best of his advantage:

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> Ramzan hurried to call Sasi Mia's mother. While he was away the Faqir in a few deft questions gleaned from the audience as much as he wanted to know of Nazu Mia's life. This he did so skilfully that hardly anybody felt that the Faqir was trying to pump out information.(29)

The Faqir had gathered from Ramzan's conversation with another man that Nazu Mia had killed a crocodile and understood immediately that Nazu Mia was a person of some importance. So he expresses a desire to meet him. When Nazu Mia arrives the Faqir flatters him by treating him in a special manner and succeeds in drawing him out. Nazu Mia unburdens his heart and begs the Faqir to pray for him. But now, the Faqir snubs him and sends him away without revealing what the future has in store for him and his family though Nazu Mia protests that since it was the Faqir who had sent for him, he should tell him why he had been called. When Nazu Mia is leaving the Faqir's lodgings, events take a dramatic turn with the advent of Asgar Mia and the resultant heated argument between these two men. The Faqir who had wished that Nazu Mia leave him alone and had supposedly sunk into a trance and did not want to be disturbed, comes out of his trance and his den, greets Asgar Mia in a cordial manner and accompanies him inside his den. This makes Nazu Mia more angry than ever and in his wrath he enters the den after them. The Faqir retains his composure though he is accused by Nazu Mia of being a charlatan and of betraying him to Asgar Mia, his rival. Encouraged by Nazu Mia's angry accusations the crowd enters the Faqir's den. Things could have taken a violent turn but, the Faqir, emerging as an accomplished master of his craft, starts reciting verses that none in the crowd could understand. Then in a state of frenzy he makes predictions which impress the uneducated people:

> . . . 'Get back, get back, you fools, for on you is a great calamity, and yet you are fighting among yourselves. The river shall rise and land and water shall be one. For Nazu Mia, I see a stormy evening when the clouds gather and the waters boil. Your best friend will be your worst enemy and your worst enemy will be your best friend. Beware, beware when the wind is from the north-east and the cloudy eagle rises in the sky. Asgar and Nazu, Nazu and Asgar—what a strange pattern of love, and hatred and suffering Allah weaves with you!'(34)

One does not need to foresee the future in order to predict that the banks of the Padma will be ravished by floods. The other prediction

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concerning Nazu Mia's and Asgar Mia's relationship with each other is no prediction what so ever because enough is already known about it. Since it was Nazu Mia who had emerged as the aggressor it is believed that he is cursed by the Faqir. From the point of view of the unlettered villagers the Faqir had foreseen the future and all except Nazu Mia are suitably impressed. Though Nazu Mia is as uneducated as the rest, yet he is a man with an exceptionally strong will and believes that it is Allah who directs the course of events: "After all, who is more powerful, Allah or a Faqir? Can a thousand Faqirs change a jot of what Allah wills?"(39) Predictions and curses of Faqirs whom he regards as charlatans do not impress him: "Why do you take it so seriously, *Ammajan*? A charlatan has set up a trade in prophecies and charms. He can never be a real Faqir. His curses are mere words—wind that leaves no trace behind."(37) Incidents such as this one, involving Faqirs are very common in the kind of society portrayed in *Men and Rivers*. They succeed in bringing out the true flavour of village life of the period. Nazu Mia, in keeping with the actual teachings of Islam is not a superstitious man. Though the omniscient narrator makes it clear that the Faqir is a pretender but by a strange co-incident Nazu Mia meets his death when he is crossing the Padma and is caught in a storm, though after the Faqir's curse, it was not his first journey across the river. Nazu Mia, decided to cross the Padma in order to collect the rent from his tenants to enable him to pay the revenue to the *Dewan* in time. His worker Idris tries to dissuade him since the season in which storms generally occur is not over as yet, but to no avail. His mother Ayesha also tries to persuade him not to go just then, but she too does not succeed. Nazu Mia argues:

> ... 'Life will be impossible if one has to live in continual fear like this. After all, men must fight the elements in order to live, and we have fought the Padma all our lives. We know her moods, *Ammajan*. There is nothing to fear today.'(54)

Nazu Mia, accompanied by his men, sets out in a boat to cross the river, determined to return the next day. But while they are at mid stream a powerful wind starts to blow which soon becomes a raging storm. The men in the boat are caught in the full fury of the storm. The wind roars and the river answers. Water, a life giving force, gets converted into one that causes death and destruction. Padma, the very river which has brought Nazu Mia prosperity, has transformed him from a pauper to one who owns acres, claims him for its own and then:

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> The storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Perhaps it lasted an hour—perhaps less. Even after the storm was over, the Padma rolled in long swinging waves. A few clouds still hung in the east and the sun went down in a blaze of glory.(58)

The sun going down in a blaze of glory becomes a metaphor for man ranged against the elements. Nazu Mia emerges as a man among men.

The second part of the novel begins with the shock of Nazu Mia's death by drowning. After his demise his mother Ayesha lives in acute agony, for seven days. Then, one night, leaving Malek her grandson asleep in bed all by himself she quietly goes to the bank of the river Padma. There, that very night she is found, dead. After Nazu Mia's death, Malek had been placed in Ayesha's arms and it was hoped that it would rekindle Ayesha's desire to live. But this was not to be. Malek and his property now pass into the care of old Basir who becomes Malek's guardian. The two maids Kulsum and Gulabi look after the house and the young boy. Malek misses both his father and grandmother. However, in the daytime, little games that children of his age play, keep him engaged. But every night Malek cries profusely till, overcome by fatigue, he falls asleep. With the passage of time and under Kulsum's care he slowly starts to overcome his sorrow. He begins to play happily with the other children. To the utter delight of Malek, one day, Basir presents him a toy bow and a quiver of arrows. He goes around the village proudly displaying his new possession. Malek makes some friends and some foes. While at play he also indulges in fights and proves his mettle. A little girl called Nuru becomes his special friend and so does a boy called Sabu. Through the course of the novel the character of Malek grows and develops rapidly. A significant development from the point of view of the growth and development of both Malek as well as the plot of the novel is the special bond that gets established between Malek and Nuru who turns out to be the daughter of Nazu Mia's arch rival Asgar Mia. Right from the beginning of their association, Nuru is concerned about the welfare of Malek. On the day when Malek is showing off his toy bow and arrows and the other boys start fighting with him, it is Nuru who informs Basir and sees to it that the fight comes to an end. Again, when in response to Sabu's provocation Malek swims too far into the river, Nuru gets quite concerned and frightened:

> Silently he waddled to the shore. Nuru came rushing up. 'Why did you go so far? I was so frightened,' she said.

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'There's nothing to fear,' Malek assured her.

'Suppose a crocodile had got you,' argued Nuru.

'It would have made no difference. My father and granny both are dead,' he said.

'If you are so rash again, I shall not talk to you,' said Nuru and her eyes were brimful of tears.(77)

At this juncture the tale takes an expected turn which helps to keep the interest alive. In his capacity as Malek's guardian, Basir has been trying hard to get the tenants pay the rent for the land in their possession but fails to succeed. In these regions of the Bengal of the time muscle power is needed in order to get the tenants to pay rent. Those very tenants who paid their rent regularly to Nazu Mia refuse to pay to Basir, since he is old and does not have any muscle men at his command. Since Asgar Mia has been elected *Panchayat* after Nazu Mia's death, Basir feels that Malek's land can be entrusted to him. He is in a position to collect the rent and pay the revenue, keeping Malek's inheritance intact. This suggestion is resisted by Gulabi and Kulsum who argue that since Asgar Mia has been Nazu Mia's bitterest enemy he could use this opportunity to deprive Nazu Mia's son of his inheritance. However, Basir is of the opinion that this is possible but not probable since Asgar Mia would not like to lose his reputation of being an honest man. Keeping his negative relationship will Nazu Mia in mind, people will keep him under close observation. Also, since Asgar Mia has no son and his daughter Nuru is fond of Malek, it could occur to Asgar Mia to marry the two of them to each other. After all, says Basir, before Nazu Mia and Asgar Mia quarrelled they were so friendly that one could compare them to two flowers on the same stalk. With no other option in hand, for better or for worse Basir makes an effort to entrust Malek and his lands in the care of Asgar Mia. A meeting of the village elders is called by Asgar Mia in order to make some arrangements about Malek's lands. At the meeting Basir admits that he is too old and consequently unable to compel the tenants to pay rent. The village elders realize that the situation is a difficult one. The elders are suspicious of Basir's suggestion that Asgar Mia should take Malek's lands and pay him an annual rent. One is informed by the omniscient narrator that the elders want that justice should be done but are unwilling to shoulder the burden since they are over burdened with their own work. They ask Asgar Mia what his intension happens to be? Asgar Mia seems to have thought over the problem at length. Emphasizing the gravity of the situation he points out how it is especially difficult for him to assume this responsibility:

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> It is difficult for me to take Malek's lands on lease. You know, my brothers, my relation with the late Nazu Mia (may Allah rest his soul in peace). Now he is dead and death should wipe out all enmity. But the human heart is weak and evil tongues wag. What shall I say? If I agree, many of you will think it is a trick to cheat Malek out of his patrimony. Even if I should try my best, there will be some who will be suspicious and evil-minded, and perhaps evil-tongued as well. We are farmers and know that there are good years and bad. Whatever I might do, people will say I have not done enough. And yet, if I don't agree to take the land, what will happen to Malek? He cannot control his tenants and will lose what he has. Shall not be blamed by men, but how shall I answer to Allah on the day of Judgement? In the name of Allah I swear that if any of you are willing to take the land on lease, I shall wash my hands of it. Then perhaps I shall have peace and also keep my good name.(105-106)

Since no one comes forward to take the land on lease, Asgar Mia accepts the responsibility, swearing in the name of Allah and Prophet Mohammad, to be just and fair:

> I swear in the name of Allah and His Prophet that I shall strive my utmost to be just and fair. May His anger burn me up if I should defraud an orphan of even a jot of his property. Every year, on full-moon day in *Baisakh*, I shall give an account of my stewardship to the meeting of the village elders, and if I err or go wrong, I shall submit to any chastisement that you might impose.(106)

It is worth being highlighted that though the government of the day collects the revenue in time without fail, it is totally unconcerned with the law and order. Bribe taking is rampant as is evident from the offer of the *Dewan's* clerk to transfer the lands to Basir if he pays him some money, when Basir complains to him about the tenant's refusal to pay rent. What ever law and order that exists, is maintained by the local population itself. Rahimpur, like the other villages of the area has a committee of elders to settle local disputes. This appears to be the effort of the villagers themselves. It is not safe to keep money in the house. This is clear from Kulsum's observation that if Malek's land is sold, the money will have to be kept in the house. This is not safe because so much money in the house would serve as an invitation for robbers

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to come and loot them. There seem to be no banks in the area. The police appear to be non-existent. Courts of law are also significantly absent. A government which does not provide security and other amenities to the local population but is prompt in collecting the revenue does not have any legitimacy and is condemnable. It can be argued, however, that the land is there and the villagers can take as much of it as they want and that there is no interference from the government at this level. But even so, the havoc that the Padma causes intermittently is always present as a danger that clouds their horizon: "In the background there always loomed the threat from the Padma, Padma the hungry serpent who had swallowed families and homesteads beyond count"(104). If the crops fail, be it due to drought or floods, the villagers are left to their own devices. On the whole it is a difficult and uncertain life.

Asgar Mia's character grows and develops through the course of the novel. He is transformed from being Nazu Mia's arch rival to becoming the real protector and guardian of Nazu Mia's son. Soon Malek is "like a son to him"(107). He adjusts well in his new home. While Asgar Mia works in the fields Malek waits for him, sitting on the harrow. As soon as Asgar Mia sits down under the shade of a tree to rest Malek prepares his *hookah* for him and lights a fire for his smoke. In the afternoon Malek goes home and brings lunch for him. Though still a boy, sometimes when there is an additional burden of work and insufficient farm hands, Malek also works in the fields. Quite often, while idle Malek carves small toys for Nuru out of pieces of bamboo. In the evening Asgar Mia and Malek return home together, like father and son. The friendship between Nuru and Malek also flowers. Both do little things for each other.

An incident which is significant from the point of view of the social customs of the inhabitants of that area is the marriage of Kulsum with Aziz. Kulsum was Nazu Mia's maid servant. She is a young widow in her twenties. Due to her love and concern for Malek she shifts to Asgar Mia's house along with him. However she soon realizes that Nuru's mother makes every effort to keep her away from Malek, setting her tasks that minimize her contact with him. Kulsum resents this immensely and even complains to Basir accusing Nuru's mother of being a witch:

> "She has bewitched Malek. How else to explain why Malek who was so fond of me never comes near me now? And she won't let him. Whenever Malek comes into the house, she sends me away on some pretext or other. 'Kulsum, do this,' 'Kulsum, do that.' As if I didn't see through her wiles. I tell you, Basir *chacha*, she has bewitched Malek."(112)

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Nuru's mother Amina, a good looking, soft spoken woman solves this problem by deciding to marry off Kulsum. Since Islam encourages remarriage of widows she succeeds in this quite easily. Amina confers with her husband Asgar Mia that since Kulsum's behaviour towards Malek is likely to spoil him and also because she is a young widow she should be married off to someone who is suitable. So, Asgar Mia arranges Kulsum's marriage with Aziz who is about thirty five years old. But Kulsum is not ready to marry anyone. However, on the day fixed for the marriage, an unwilling Kulsum is married off with the help of an old trick which makes a mockery of the right given to a woman in Islam to agree or refuse to marry a man. In Islam, marriage is a contract between two adults of the opposite sex. The woman's consent is essential for the marriage to take place. When asked whether she agrees to marry the person named, she has to categorically state yes or no. She is asked thrice. When Kulsum is asked whether she is willing to accept Aziz as her husband Kulsum keeps quiet and lowers her head because she is scared that Aziz Mia will get angry if she says no. The women who have assembled for the wedding had taken hold of her head and make it nod:

> Thrice Basir asked the question, 'Kulsum, do you agree to marry Aziz?'
>
> She made no reply, but every time, some of the women caught hold of her head and made her nod.
>
> 'She has given her consent,' said Nuru's mother.(117)

Often, illiterate Muslim women the world over are still fooled into marriage like this. A marriage of this nature has no place in Islam. Imperfect knowledge of Islamic law is the root cause of such malpractices. In the first part of the novel when Nazu Mia arrives at the Faqir's den there is a reference to the disciples of the Faqir reading the Quran aloud in Arabic, the language in which it was bestowed on Prophet Mohammad. Nazu Mia asks the disciple to tell him the meaning of the verses. The disciple is astonished: "The meaning of the verses? But we don't know the meaning. Aren't they the words of Allah? That is enough for us;"(42) The point is that if the translation of the Quran is read along side, many a misconception will be removed and true knowledge will spread leading to a better quality of life.

The drought and floods that occur in the second part of the novel are significant from the point of view of the growth and development of the plot as well as the growth and development of the chief characters. The novel also sheds light on the plight of the population in general in times such as these. The rains fail for two consecutive years. Consequently

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a drought sweeps the entire area. Even a well to do farmer like Asgar Mia is exposed to scarcity and want. Famished men, women and children, cattle dying due to starvation, a blazing sun over head, the parched earth and fields bereft of crops become a familiar landscape. Robberies increase. In one case a merchant disappears along with his grain. By the end of the second year of the drought Asgar Mia and his family have exhausted whatever stores of grain they had. All their cattle except two bullocks have been killed. The entire family has become lean and thin. Now after two years it rains and rains heavily for four days and nights. The Padma overflows its banks and there is floods water all around:

> When morning broke at last, it was a strange and desolate world that the survivors saw. Familiar landmarks had been swept away. There was hardly any trace of the village. A few fallen-in roofs indicated where the houses had been. On the vast desolation of waters floated a few boats—black spots that were a pathetic symbol of man's insignificance before the elemental forces of nature.(124)

The Padma had changed course and now flowed over what had been Asgar Mia's and Malek's lands. This brings about a complete reversal in their fortunes. They loose all their lands, as well as their house and become homeless and penniless wanderers as a result of this deluge. Asgar Mia is distraught but for Malek it is a major experience and he does not despair.

The introduction to part three of the novel has similarities with the introduction to part one. Change in pre-modern societies is often circular. In *Men and Rivers* things seem to have come a full circle. Malek now a young man of nineteen, stands and looks across the sea in much the same way as his father Nazu Mia in the introduction to part one of the novel, had stood on the bank of the river Padma and thought about his past. Then, Nazu Mia was a successful man, at the height of his success, contemplating over the sweet and sour events of his life. He was a self-made man. Now, in the same manner Malek, stands on a small hill gazing at the sea and thinks about his past. In part three the Malek that one meets is also a self made man. He has survived a devastating flood that ravished his home and fields and rendered him homeless and possession less. He is now settled in Byanchar, a virgin island along with Asgar Mia and Nuru. Hard work has transformed them into prosperous farmers:

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> ... Asgar Mia had again grown into a prosperous farmer. Malek had prospered with him, for the lands were held jointly in their names. Their fields were large and they could no longer till the lands themselves. They employed farm-hands. Some of the men who had formerly worked for Asgar Mia found their way to Byanchar.
>
> Inside the house, Nuru queened over all. Even Asgar Mia submitted to her gentle rule, and as for Malek, he would have laid down his life at her bidding.
>
> A deep feeling of gratitude overwhelmed Malek as he stood on the hill by the seashore and looked across the waves. 'Allah is merciful,' he said and slowly turned towards the house.(129)

Here, Malek exhibits the same demeanour and contentment that was exhibited by Nazu Mia his father in the introduction to part one of the novel:

> Allah is merciful, he said. How could he forget that he had started life with two bare hands, but Allah had blessed his labours and today he had land and men and money, and honour in the eyes of his neighbours?(8)

Like his father he too is a self-made man. An emotion common to both father and son is a sense of gratitude to Allah for providing sustenance. Both acknowledge that the Almighty is merciful. Malek is now well settled in Byanchar along with Asgar Mia and Nuru. However Nuru's mother is no more. She was unable to survive the hardships they faced since the flood. One day, during the early days of their struggle for survival in Byanchar she dies:

> Like the last parting kick of a malignant fate, there was one blow still waiting for Asgar Mia. He brought his small family to Byanchar and made a small clearing in the forest where he built a hut. Poor Nuru's mother could not reconcile herself to the change in her fate. One morning she did not get up from her bed. Nuru called to her but she would not listen and Nuru flung herself upon her mother's body and wept as if her heart would break.(128)

Here, Humayun Kabir's concept of a malignant fate is similar to that of Thomas Hardy. In spite of his many losses Malek is satisfied since he owns a lot of land jointly with Asgar Mia. He is also quite happy because he is in love with Nuru and she reciprocates his love. The story

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takes another turn here with the disappearance of Malek. Asgar Mia searches for him himself as well as sends out search parties, but to no avail. Malek is not found. Both Asgar Mia as well as Nuru grieve deeply. Over a month passes with no news of Malek and all except Asgar Mia, Nuru and Aziz lose all hope. Then, one day Malek returns. We learn that while sailing on the stream in his small boat on his way to the hillock by the sea where Nuru's mother was buried, he had been carried out to the sea by a strong current. Once there, he had been captured by pirates. This part of the novel provides information which exposes a weakness in the construction of the plot. Malek's and Nuru's love for one another and their desire to get married is instrumental in revealing that Nuru's mother before she married Asgar Mia was married to Nazu Mia. Malek was born as a result of this marriage. Nuru and Malek are brother and sister. Hence marriage between them is a taboo. It also becomes apparent that a love triangle was the cause of friends becoming enemies. The plot is weakened by too many romantic incidents of this nature. Malek blames Asgar Mia for keeping such important things a secret. In Nazu Mia's life time battle lines were clearly drawn between him and Asgar Mia. But after the demise of Nazu Mia it is possible for Asgar Mia to forget old enmity and give Malek the love and protection of a father most probably because his wife wishes it. Though in the beginning his love for his wife may have been instrumental in this but with the passage of time Asgar Mia begins to love Malek in reality. The way he searches for and waits and grieves for Malek when he is abducted by Mang Po establishes this beyond doubt. Asgar Mia emerges an honest and compassionate man. Neither Asgar Mia nor Amina reveal the truth to both the children because they want to protect their "young lives from the shadow of doubt"(182). Malek and Nuru both are distraught. Malek blames Asgar Mia for keeping this a secret but Nuru understands her father's predicament and suffering. Though Malek questions: "How can I look upon Nuru as my sister now? All my youth's dreams were woven round her—will a word unweave them so suddenly?"(183), yet he does not break the religious and social custom that there can be no marriage between brother and sister and walks out of the life of Asgar Mia and Nuru. At this point, the symbolic significance of an episode in part two of the novel in which Malek and Nuru as small children are found stuck in the mud of the canal that separated Asgar Mia's home from that of Nazu Mia becomes apparent.

The canvas of *Men and Rivers* has been largely painted with the metaphor of the river. Here, the ebb and flow of the river becomes a part of the ebb and flow of life. Affirming this Asgar Mia says: "We are men of the river. We are peasants. We build our homes on sand

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and the water washes them away. We build again and again, and we till the earth and bring the golden harvest out of the waste land"(183). Sustaining the metaphor Malek replies: "I also am a son of the river. I too must build my home on sand. But the old must die before the new can be born. I must go away, Asgar *chacha*, and who knows, perhaps one day I might return"(183). Asgar Mia murmurs to himself: "The river must change its course and leave behind old familiar banks. But the river returns. It never forgets the old channels"(183). Like natural things the life of human beings is seen to have a cyclic pattern. All the major characters in *Men and Rivers* fight against nature in much the same way as the old man in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Some times the dice is loaded in their favour and some times against them but nature is infinitely much more powerful than any individual. In spite of this the spirit of man triumphs.

Some of the minor characters in the novel like Basir who does not even contemplate depriving Malek of his lands even though the *Dewan's* clerk suggests a way of doing so, Kulsum and Gulabi who sincerely love and protect the orphaned child Malek to the best of their ability exhibit the virtues of honesty and integrity and endear themselves to the reader. The appeal of *Men and Rivers* lies in its theme which possesses in itself ". . . a substantial value and a genuine human meaning . . ." (Hudson, 132) because it is concerned ". . . with passions, conflicts and problems which . . . belong to the essential texture of life . . . which make life strenuous, intense, and morally significant" (Hudson, 132). Though it can be argued that the plot of *Men and Rivers* has "...too many romantic joints—a love-triangle making bosom friends sworn enemies; lovers suddenly discovering that they are children of the same mother" (Naik, 174) but in spite of this a major strength of the novel is a sense of unity in its plot-structure. The three parts of the novel are dove-tailed together in much the same way as the lives of Nazu Mia, Asgar Mia and Malek are entwined with each other.

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Ram as Folk Hero in the "Ramains" of Himachal Pradesh

Meenakshi F. Paul

The *Ramyana* finds many expressions in the folk literature of Himachal Pradesh and different regions of the state have interspersed and interpenetrative gathas, geets and kathas—ballads, songs and narratives, as well as drama relating to the chief incidents in the *Ramayana*. This kaleidoscopic synergy of seamless blending of forms can be aptly described through the metaphor of a Pahari snack, muri, which is a mixture of grain, with nuts, prunes, raisins, et cetera. Different areas of the hill state display variations in the choice and ratio of the ingredients. The basic component in the Pahari *Ramayans*, the "Ramains," is the name, personality, character and exploits of Ram in the popular consciousness, within the cultural contexts of the Pradesh.

The first effort to compile and write the various Ramains in Himachal was made in 1974 by the Himachal Academy of Arts, Culture and Languages, to commemorate the 400th year of Tulsi's *Ramcharitamanas*. Recently, the Academy has published another seminal work entitled: *Himachal Pradesh: Ramkatha ke Lokprasang*, which supplements the earlier groundbreaking work. Although, Himachal Pradesh primarily worships Shiva and Shakti, and most local deities are emanates of these principal deities, Krishna and Ram also find significant space in the lives of the Himachal folk. In district Kangra, the Ramaini is performed as Aihnchali in verse and prose by the worker communities, Ghirth and Jheer, as well as the Gaddi tribe (Vyathit 7-8; Sharma, Jagdish 13). The nuptial songs, suhag, and the birth songs, *hansnu-khelnu* also recount the wedding of Ram-Sita and the birth of Ram. In the area of lower Mahasu and parts of Mandi and Bilaspur districts, the folk ballad-drama, Barlaj was performed, in addition to Aihnchali (Anand 35-40). However, Barlaj is almost extinct

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traditional performers either dead or very old. The Barlaj is divided into Ramain (early years of Ram), Rathaula (the hunt of Marich) and Chhokra (Sita's abduction and after). The first Barlaj begins with the stories of Creation and of Vali-Vamanavatar.

In almost all versions of the Pahari Ramains, the focus is on Sitaharan, the abduction of Sita, with Hauran being performed by itself in several areas. In the villages of Kullu valley, *hauran* is performed from the last day of Dussehra to fifteenth Pausha, or even till Basant Panchami (Thakur, Molu Ram 89; Thakur, Kamlesh 26). This period corresponds to the coldest part of winter, after the harvest and before the next sowing. In the *hauran*, two men stand one behind the other, bending forward from the waist. A painted, coarse woollen cloth (pattu) is slung over them. On the head of the man in front, deer horns shaped out of hemp are fixed and decorated with flowers. This 'deer' gambols while two other men dance, one in the guise of a woman. After a determined time, the 'couple' stop the dance and, wearing masks, act out the dramatic performance, *swang*. It is said that Hanuman and some of his associates disguised themselves as rakshasas and went to Lanka to look for Sita. Hanuman asked Ravan for permission to perform *hauran* in remembrance of the sacrifice made by his uncle, Marich who had lured Ram away in the form of the golden deer and given up his life to fulfil Ravan's desire. Ravan gave them permission and they performed *hauran* from house to house. While the four performers engaged the people in the *hauran*, others quickly searched the house for Sita. When they did not find her they signalled this to the performers with a loud 'ha-ha' who immediately left-off their act and the party moved to another house. When they finally did find Sita in the Ashok Vatika, they cried out 'hee-hee' and the *hauran* search concluded. 'Hee' in some dialects of Pahari also indicates 'is here,' which makes the alliterative and dramatic cry, meaningful as well. In Kinnaur, fifteen days of the month of Magha are devoted to singing songs about Lord Ram with emphasis on Sita *haran*. This is done to protect themselves from being overpowered by demons, spirits and departed souls while the local deities are away to Kinner Kailash to participate in the annual Pasa Tournament hosted by Shiva. Thus, Ram is not a "Shu" or local devata to the Kinnauri mind (Negi 20).

However, Sri Raghunath ji, who desired to leave Ayodhya and settle in the picturesque valley, is the reigning deity of Kullu and surrounding areas (Thakur, Vidya 119; Swati 115-118). The Ramain of this region, as well as those of Una, Kangra, Nirmand and Mahasu add considerable detail and local elements to the received events of the main source, Tulsi's

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Ramcharitmanas, especially to the birth of Ram, Sita *haran* and Ram's search for his wife. For instance, the Jubbal-Kotkhai Ramain has the Pandavas fighting alongside Ram at Lanka; it also has the Pathans and Mughals fighting in Ram's army with cannons and gunpowder:

Nau lakh ghora chalo paulgai
Chhah lakh Mughlau Pathano. ...
(Singh 93)

The folk singer of Kullu sums up the Ramain into a pithy couplet for the man who had fallen asleep during the performance of the Ram Katha, only to awaken in the morning to enquire whether Sita was a man or a woman. The *kathayaru* tells him:

Ravanai Neu Rama ra baur
Ta Rame phuku, Ravana ra ghaur
Yai sa Ramaina.

(Ravan stole Ram's wife so he burnt down his house;
This is the Ramayana).
(Thakur, Vidya 121)

This encapsulation of the *Ramayana* marks the simple and easily comprehensible terms of the Pahari Ramains. In this body of synchronous literature, the hero, Ram is cast in the mould of the familiar and reflects local attitudes, belief and demeanour. For instance, in the Mandi Ramaini, Ram evinces many easily identifiable characteristics to the people of the region. In one episode Ram is seen making ready to go to court for a hearing:

Kamleya mahanua, utth chal Ram kachahriya jana ho
Utth chal dera Ram kachahriya lana ho.
(Ram, Kanshi 67)

In the vein of the most recently wed young men, Ram humours Sita in the early days of their marriage by promising to buy her gifts of clothes and jewellery to adorn herself with:

Sira re saluye paihno meri Janaki
Orho meri Janaki, tay mera mann moheya. ...
(Ram, Kanshi 68)

As a young boy Ram is shown to be fond of fine clothes and good food:

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Dudh dubna chaliyan o balaka
. ...
Savere re tarke kapreyan dhona chaliya Rama
O balaka kapareyan reya shaukinya. ...
(Ram, Kanshi 64)

The contrast with the life in exile later on in the narrative is thus built-up by the folk narrator. In many areas of Himachal, including district Mandi, military service is the chosen field by most able-bodied men. Thus, in another episode, Ram is described as a soldier who has gone to fight Ravan beyond the borders, while back home people wait anxiously for his letter:

Kithi ta rehende mere Raghurai ve
Chitthi Ram bali aaj bhi na ayi ve.
(Ram, Kanshi 63)

In this context Ram is primarily seen as a warrior, with valour being at a premium in the rugged life of the Himalayas. A man of prowess, he is also obstinate and dogged. The Nirmand Ramain relates this strong-minded aspect of the folk hero. When the queen mothers are preparing to perform *sati* with their deceased king, Kaikeyi pauses near the pyre and Ram asks her the reason for this hesitation. She replies that she would jump into the flaming pyre if he promised in the next birth he would be born from her womb. Ram concedes her request but maintains that he would not feed himself from her breast in that lifetime but would drink his mother Kaushalya's milk. Kaikeyi snorts and tells him that he will be a baby then and she would forcibly breastfeed him. However, it is Ram's will that prevails and he is born as Krishna in the next avatar; Kaikeyi becomes Devaki and Kaushalya is reborn as Yashoda (Sharma, Deepak 109-10).

Further, Ram is also seen as an everymans brother, husband and householder. As an elder brother, Ram advises Laxman to complete and perfect his knowledge and sends him in search of Guru Goraknath (Atrey *Lokprasang* 138-39). In Mandi, Hanuman is said to be Ram's maternal uncle—a possible reference to the oft-repeated teasing phrase: 'bandar tera mama,' your uncle is a monkey. In another version, Ram is Hanuman's mama. One day they sit eating off the same plate. In the first account, after every morsel Hanuman surreptitiously washes his hands to keep the food pure for Ram. In the latter, he does the same only to tease Ram later that he had allowed Hanuman to eat *jootha*. Ram smiles and informs him that he had done no such thing as he too had washed his hand

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after every bite. This clearly alludes to the local view that a nephew is to be honoured and must always be served untouched food (Atrey *Pahari* 55 and *Lokprasang* 136).

Recognizable patterns of family tensions and undercurrents find clear expression in the folk Ramains of Sirmaur and Kullu. When Ram and Laxman return after killing Marich to find Sita missing, Ram suspects Laxman of having hidden her (Thakur, Molu 88; Chauhan 78). This is an obvious reference to the formerly widespread, institution of polyandry in these areas. Ram wants to kill Laxman but asks him to first cook and eat food, as it is wrong to kill a hungry man. Laxman does not argue with his elder brother, aware that jealousy and suspicion preclude reasoning. Instead, he vainly tries to light the hearth with one piece of firewood. When Ram points out that he must use at least two pieces of wood to get the fire going, Laxman replies:

Kelhe dale ni khaan
Kehle bhaiye ni maan.

(One log cannot cook food and
One brother alone is no good).
(Thakur, Vidya 128)

In the Kullu Ramain, Sita accuses Laxman that he has his eye on her and so does not want to go in search of Ram who has followed the golden deer (Thakur, Vidya 126). This is an obvious reference to the rather fluid relationship of brother-in-law and sister-in-law, where marriage between the two was possible and not uncommon. Stung by her allegation, Laxman cannot help but refer to her adopted status and her unknown lineage when Ram and he come back with the skin of the golden deer to find Sita gone (Thakur, Vidya 127). This could be a subtle reference to the practice of *reet*, in which the woman leaves her husband's house out of choice to live with another. The chosen man would then be required to pay a determined amount to the previous husband and the matter would be thus settled. Although this custom had social sanction, still, there was disapproval attached to it and women were discouraged from it in the name of family honour. Laxman's words echo this censure.

In the Ramains of Kangra and Chamba, Ram is suspicious of Sita who takes inordinately long to return with water from the well. He shares his misgivings with Laxman and wonders whether she has left him and gone back to her parents' home, or was she lost in idle gossip with her friends. When Sita returns to find her husband and brother-in-law casting aspersions on her, she is furious and says that she will

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break and burn their bows and arrows for backbiting. There is a subtle jibe in her words at Ram and Laxman who exercise their sharp tongues to bad-mouth her, instead of following their Rajput dharma and using their weapons for the good of society. Further, there is a hint of a taunt at their manhood for picking on her instead of pursuing acts of valour. Ram is provoked enough at his wife's jeer to sharply warn Sita to hold her tongue or he would have her immured alive in a wall (Vyathit 19).

Yet another local element is added to the character of Ram in the Chamba Ramain, in which Ram is shown as a believer in omens. He is so upset when a crow croaks from a withered tree just as he and Laxman set out to look for Sita that he almost faints with anxiety. Ram is also depicted as a simple village man who tries to avoid trouble, if possible, by taking pre-emptive action, but who ultimately concedes the omnipotence of destiny. According to the Lahauli Ram Katha, during the period of exile Ram makes his palace in 'antarikshapuri' to avoid the maleficent effects of the naga in 'nagalok,' of the sun and the moon in 'aakashlok,' and of kaalpurush in 'manushyalok' (Loppa 12). Nevertheless, Marich does arrive there and Ram must pick up his bow and quiver to follow his destiny. Thus, these scenes of domesticity and interstices in familial relationships, together with contextualizing the characters in the hill customs and milieu, make Ram and his people of the Pahari Ramains easily accessible and identifiable to the masses.

In an interesting Ram Katha of Nirmand, Ram is said to have divorced his wife in a previous birth. This places Ram squarely in the midst of the life of common people. It is a reflection of the easily opened bonds of marriage in the area, at one time. Divorce was not seen as failure of or blot on a person; rather, it was taken as a matter-of-fact aspect of life, albeit painful and causing bitterness. The folk narrative depicts the wife from the earlier birth as a jackal who laughs loudly in the jungle while Ram and his brothers sit mourning the death of their father. All other creatures are quiet and the lion questions her strange behaviour. She asks to be taken to the princes of Ayodhya and mocks them as ill-omened offspring. Ram comes out to kill the impertinent jackal and as he picks up his bow, the mourning period is deemed to be over. Laxman follows his brother who has been stopped in his tracks by the jackal who derides him by pointing out that if he killed her he would forever be known as the slayer of a she-jackal. When Laxman steps forward to silence the beast, Ram stops him. He tells Laxman that she was his wife in an earlier birth in which he had divorced her and she had only come to get back at him in the form of the jackal (Sharma, Deepak 110-111).

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In addition to placing Ram at the zeitgeist of the remote areas of Himachal, this katha also brings out the intimate interaction of the hill people with nature. In an analogous story, grief-stricken at the death of Dashrath, Ram falls in a faint for a number of days. Perpetual night falls over the world and there is danger of Creation being annihilated. A jackal then comes to the brothers and scoffs at their weakness that allows Ravan to carry away Sita. Ram is jolted out of his stupor and he steps out in anger to slay the animal. As soon as he does so dawn breaks and mourning ends (Sharma, Yograj 100). This is an adequate indicator of the closeness of the hill people to nature and there are many occasions when this proximity and affinity are highlighted: According to the Lahauli Ram Katha, when Ram struggles to skin the golden deer with his knife as the hide draws close together again. After much struggle he is guided by a crow who advises him to insert small wooden pieces in the hide as he cuts it to keep the two ends from meeting (Loppa 11). In the Ram Kathas of Kinnaur and of Kullu the monkey king sits crying in the way of Ram and Laxman as they are about to set out in search of Sita. Ram is vexed at this inauspicious omen and wants to kill the simian, but, Laxman stops him from doing so. The monkey king tells Ram that the langur king had run away with his wife and if Ram would help him get her back, he would return the favour by helping him to get back his wife (Negi 128; Thakur, Vidya 129). According to the folk Ramains of Kullu and Mandi as also the Ram Katha of Hamirpur, Ram asks all the flora and fauna for clues to find Sita. If they were helpful and concerned he blessed them, if not, he cursed them. Thus, the druba grass, who tried to thwart Ravan's return to Lanka with Sita, is given auspicious status and is used to purify, sanctify and perform puja. On the other hand, the chil-pine tree is condemned to burn with the resin within it (Ram, Atma 35; Thakur, Molu 88-9). In Kinnaur, the Ram Katha narrates a humorous story about how Hanuman offered to lay his tail over the ocean as a bridge for Ram's army. Familiar with the caprice of monkeys, Ram tests Hanuman's steadiness by throwing an apple into the water. Hanuman immediately leaps after it. Then Ram explains the importance of self-control to him and points out that had he done this while the soldiers were crossing the sea on his tail, they would have all drowned. Hanuman then meekly stretches his tail as an immovable bridge and stays still until the last warrior has crossed over (Loppa 14).

The Ramain in the Hamskad dialect of Kinnaur makes Bharat the eldest son of Dashrath (Negi 17; Sharma, Banshiram 159-161). In a society where polyandry was common till very recent times, this supposition makes

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Bharat the heir to his father's kingdom and the first husband to the common wife the brothers would take in marriage. In such a situation, the younger brothers were often deprived of their due even if they were more deserving than the eldest brother. However, Dashrath is said to believe that Ram is more deserving of the throne and nominates him his heir. This happening is exploited by the evil Phapha Kuttan, handmaiden to Kaikeyi, who then insists that Kaikeyi's son, Bharat, ought to get his right of primogeniture even if it entails the exile of Ram. Thus, in this episode of the folk *Ramayan*, Ram's exceptional qualities are accentuated to draw attention to the underlying tensions within the social institution of polyandry. The rights and obligations of the eldest son and the desire of the younger brother(s) to be independent and carve out an individual identity are tellingly brought out in this rendering.

Folk literature provides a grounded and spontaneous alternative discourse to the idealized canonical literature and this is clearly visible in the Pahari Ramains and Ram Kathas. To illustrate this aspect in the corpus of Ram-related folk literature, it is worth noting that Ravan and Kaikeyi are not shown as evil incarnate in it. In the Una Ramain, for instance, Ram is the agency in his exile and not the receiver of a parental diktat or a victim of a step-mother's designs. The narrative recounts how Ram does not return till late evening from play one day. Kaikeyi goes in search of him and finds him sitting on the riverbank. Ram asks Kaikeyi for a boon and then demands that she have him exiled so that he could fulfil the work he had come to accomplish in this world (Satyavati 42). In another episode of the same Ramain, Ram invites his foe, Ravan to perform puja for the consecration of the Shivalinga at Rameshwaram. This Ram does as an acknowledgement of Ravan's great learning and underscores the fact that reverence for the erudite runs deep in the psyche of the people in Himachal Pradesh, the chosen place for the pursuit of tapas by Rishis in early times. It is said that after Ravan finished the rites, Ram and Laxman bowed to the Brahmin for his blessings. It is then that Ravan bestowed upon them the boon of victory in the impending war (Shant 36-7).

It can, then, be concluded from the above that the character of Ram in the Pahari Ramains of Himachal performs both important functions of a folk hero: first, he reflects the rooted attitudes, beliefs, customs and value system of a people as a result of which his character holds out much affinity to the common folk. Second, he puts forward certain ideals and exemplary behaviour for his people to emulate. While the latter leads toward reverence, the former facilitates identification; and together, they place Ram in the paradigm of the folk hero in the literature and minds of Himachal Pradesh. It is, thus, imperative that the fast disappearing

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oral literature related to Ram be kept alive. Although, efforts to preserve and crystallize Pahari Ramains in a particular period is a necessary and important ongoing step, yet, the absence of the pulse of the times, the life rhythms of the people of Himachal, and the fluidity and multiplicity of oral versions, would lead to it becoming an atrophied and fossilized artefact of the past rather than being the joyous and tumultuous flow of lived life and alive expressions.

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The Home and The World by Rabindranath Tagore, tr. by Nivedita Sen, Srishti Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2004.

The first question that comes to mind when one picks up a second rendering of Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* from Bangla to English is – After Surendranath Tagore's translation of the novel[1], was a second one really necessary? After all, it is Surendranath's translation that is being used both within and outside the academia and a sizeable section of the non-Bangla readership may have been acquainted with the writings of the Nobel laureate through it alone! Apart from the popularity of the novel and the scholarly attention it has received making it find its way into the undergraduate/postgraduate English literature curriculum in several universities both in India and abroad and the cinematographic transcreation[2] of the same (in Bangla) by Satyajit Ray, perhaps it is the right time to renew the novel by a fresh translation of it in contemporary English and it is this fact alone that motivates one to pick it up and see whether it makes any difference after all.

The first thing that strikes a reader who picks up the second translation is the colloquial quality of the 'Bangla-English' that is purposefully used. In a globalized world where the ethics of multiculturalism has become a dominant marker, hyphenated identities are no longer restricted to transnational movements of people. It has become a common phenomenon within national boundaries too as regional identity stakes come to the forefront celebrating the very diversity of India as a post-colonial nation. Hence, Sen's opening lines—

> O dear Ma, I remember the vermilion in the parting of your hair, your wide, red-bordered sari, and your deep, gentle, tranquil eyes, all spread like the crimson rays of the dawn across my heart. (1)

where the Bangla terms 'Ma' and 'sari' are simply retained without any explanation at all. It immediately takes the reader to the socio-cultural context in which the source language (SL) text is embedded. Compare this to Surendranath Tagore's opening lines of the novel –

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> 'MOTHER, today I have put the vermilion mark at the parting of your hair, the *sari* which you used to wear, with its wide red border, and those wonderful eyes of yours, full of depth and peace.' (17)

with footnotes to the words 'vermilion mark' and 'sari'. This clearly demonstrates the considerations that the translator had in mind regarding the target readership. While the first translation was primarily catering to the cultural needs of a Euro-American community, the second one is geared towards serving the literary/aesthetic needs of the non-Bangla speaking readership both within and outside India but on terms that are governed by the cultural nuances of the SL and not the target language (TL). Several such instances can be culled out by comparing the two translations. Consider the next example: while Sen introduces the central metaphor of 'ghare-baire' (the inside-outside axis of home) in the following manner,

> 'My husband was very keen that I should be able to step outside the andarmahal. One day I asked him, "Why do I need the outside world?"
> "The world may need you," he replied.' (15)

In the 1919 translation, it is rendered as -

> 'My husband was very eager to take me out of *purdah*. One day I said to him: 'What do I want with the outside world?'
> 'The world may want you,' he replied. (23)

While Tagore himself used the following word structure to convey the same:

> *Amar swamir boro iccha chhilo amake baire ber korben. Ekdin ami take bollum, bairete amar dorkar ki?*
> *Tini bollen, tomake bairer dorkar thakte pare.* (478)

If one takes a cursory glance, the term 'purdah' seems to be an unwarranted inclusion to satisfy the common perceptions/misperceptions of European ideas about India in particular and the Orient in general. Again the term 'want' in place of 'need' is an unconscious slip on the part of Surendranath Tagore as he seems to portray only one dominant trait of Bimala's character ignoring the complexity of the SL text and thereby structures her representation in sexual terms alone highlighting the features of her desire. Tagore's conceptualization of the character emerges from the preemption

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of conflict that he envisages would follow from the *clash of civilizations* as Nikhilesh (Bimala's husband) is interested in 'enlightening' his 'traditional' wife through the European model of education. In the context of the novel it is Nikhilesh's experiment with his wife's 'education' that leads to the tragedy ending in his death and a psychologically distraught Bimala who realizes the price she had to pay to fulfill the same. By making Nikhilesh, Bimala and Sandip tell their individual stories in a biographical mode, the author tries to impress upon the reader that the brunt of what happened as a result had to be a shared responsibility of sorts. Empty moralizing or creating cardboard characters with certain slogans to demonstrate ideas was in no way the objective of Tagore. He rather used his critical consciousness to carve out psychologically intense characters who demonstrate through the working out of an internal logic that governed their being the problematic at hand. The extract cited above thereby demonstrates that Sen has been more faithful and stylistically closer to the SL text than Surendranath Tagore who is seldom seen to move out of the thralldom of colonial servitude even while translating an author who had ideas that were celebrated because of their fiercely independent status. Tagore is regarded as a leading figure of Bengali renaissance that had within it the wisdom of the best in the East and the West as in its oppositional frame-work, it carried the vision of a critical alternative that championed a universal humanism whose lineages were definitely not one-dimensional in nature.

Another remarkable feature of Sen's translation is the incorporation of several non-italicized Bangla words and phrases into the English text like 'raja' (2), 'badshah' (2), 'aanchal' (9), 'Chotorani' (12), 'Mejorani' (301), 'Didi' (261), 'Thakurpo' (292), 'Swadeshi' (23), 'Sandipbabu' (42)[3], 'Bande Mataram' (42),'andarmahal' (46), 'pithe' (292), etc. without any footnote as blocks disturbing the visual symmetry of the text. This in turn indicates the self-confidence of contemporary translators who unlike the first generation Indian writers of English, hardly attempt to work on terms dictated by the needs of the TL readership. The conscious attempt here is undoubtedly to convey through the Bangla-ized English a socio-literary context that is both a foreign as well as an integral part of the cultural environment of the SL owing to the history of colonization. The well-researched glossary (317-320) at the end of the text merely informs the reader about myths and legends of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon that Tagore had used to weave in a symbolic matrix pertinent to the semiological overtones of the text as well as the meanings of some common Bangla words like 'batasha', 'Chandramallika', 'Magh',

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'Shojne', etc. that had been retained in the translation. Interestingly the term '*Sajna*' (202) in the first translation is spelt as 'shojne', 'Moguls and Pathans' (18) as 'Moghuls and Pathaans' (4), etc. following the phonetic structure of the SL that captures the colloquial Bangla. The minimal use of footnotes by Sen in the main text unlike the first translation, except to convey historical and literary references or comparative ones referring to Surendranath's translation and explaining the choice of particular usage of words like the Urdu 'zenana' (20) in place of 'andarmahal' (14) for the term 'antahpur' in the SL text helps in unhindered reading. Again the 'Translator's Note' (312-316) discusses the departures, the omissions and commissions that the first translator makes and the liberty with which huge chunks of the SL text are simply deleted as they were either too difficult to translate or regarded as superfluous for the TL readership. These are in my opinion the major strengths of the second translation which is free from the colonial hangovers of the first. One however wonders why a conscious translator like Sen chooses to retain the title of Surendranath's translation *The Home and the World* despite her objection to it as mentioned in the detailed explanation of the same in the 'Introduction' (x-xi) and not leave it just as *Ghare-Baire* following the internal logic of the translated text that has fearlessly accented the English in a particular way.

The translator's attempt to capture the natural cadence and linguistic rhythm of the SL text and the complete nonchalance demonstrated by her regarding the 'difficulties' that a non-Bangla or a non-Indian reader may face in trying to catch the cultural nuances of the TL text is yet another commendable feature of the second translation. One is strongly reminded of African writings in English where authors like Achebe, Ngugi, Amcheta, Ezwenzi, Armah, among several others had tried to politicize the usage of English as a language by consciously Africanizing it. The manner in which the Igbo world is presented in *Things Fall Apart* or the nature of urban Nigeria in *Jagua Nana* imbues the English language with an African spirit. Sen's translation definitely reflects the direction in which we are all headed as surely the 21st century would usher in not only the sure demise of Queen's English but would also pave the way for the birth of a legion where one would be forced to speak a single language with a multi-forked tongue.

Anuradha Ghosh

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1. First published in Great Britain by Macmillan in 1919 and later by Penguin Books Ltd. in 1985. It was first published in India by Penguin Books India as late as 1999.
2. The film *Ghare Baire* was made in 1984. (The cover design of the book is based on a shot from the film).
3. Instead of 'Sandip Babu' (27) as in the first translation, the term 'Babu' retains the pejorative connotation for the white English readership as it was a term that was used for clerks, quite opposed to the semantic nuances of the same in Bangla where the term acts like a suffix and is a marker of respect used in Sen's text.

Ram Nabami Natak, by Gumanhiram Barua, tr. by Tilottoma Misra, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2007, Pp xxxvii+72, Rs.295/-

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Ram Nabami Natak, the first modern Assamese play (written in 1857, published in book form in 1870) has been translated into English with a very exhaustive Introduction, obviously essential for a book like this which, in spite of not being one of huge literary merit, is of great significance in the history of the concerned society and its literature. It was the first play in Assamese with a tragic ending. The Introduction makes interesting reading, as, instead of treading a hackneyed, uncritical route, it convincingly delineates the situation the miniscule Assamese middle-class found itself in, in the nineteenth century. And it was a confusing situation. The feudal monarchy of the Ahoms was replaced by the crude bureaucracy of the (East India) Company; Bengali was introduced as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam; American Christian Missionaries arrived at Sivasagar (where the Ahoms had their Capital for most part of their six-century rule) with a printing press and published the first Assamese journal *Orunodoi* (1846) with the purpose of propagating Christianity in the region.

But while the translator brings forth a fairly detailed picture of the nineteenth century Assam, some of her interpretations on various aspects are not incontrovertible. As it is not within the scope of this review to take up each and every point of the more than seventy page Introduction, I intend to limit my reaction to those observations only which are directly related to *Ram Nabami* in particular and Assamese literary scene of the period in general.

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First, the translator shows *Jonaki* (the first genuine Assamese literary journal published from Calcutta from 1889) and the triumvirate behind this—namely Lakshminath Bezbarua, Hemchandra Goswami and Chandrakumar Agarwalla—as consciously upholding the monotheism of Sankaradeva in defence against the rapidly expanding influence of Christianity in the region. Such an observation overlooks many realities obtaining at the time. 'West' should have been the word in place of 'Christianity'. This west had English as its language, technology as its instrument and Christianity as its religion. The educated minds in Assam saw the future of the devastated society in the healthy symbiosis of their indigenous treasures and the western enlightenment.

Those young minds of the time took it upon themselves to bring before the modern world the gems of Assamese literary, cultural and spiritual tradition and thus they sang the glow and glory of the Sankara era. Smt. Misra appreciates Gunabhiram's "dispassionate evaluation" of the works of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. But it is difficult to agree with her when she says, "This trend....was however soon replaced by the passionate nationalism of the *Jonaki* writers of the last decades of the nineteenth century, who emphasized the uniqueness of the Assamese Vaishnava poets rather than seeing them as a part of the Bhakti tradition." The lectures delivered by Lakshminath Bezbarua in the royal court of Baroda in 1934 can be referred to as a gem of testimony of his erudition on the Bhakti movement and Sankaradeva's role in it. I quote just one sentence—

> In today's article...I will come straight to Bhakti Marga or the path of devotion and love, the subject matter of my discourse. The great Ramanuja Acharya, and after him a host of followers of his school and others, including Sri Sankaradeva of Assam and Sri Chaitanyadeva of Bengal...expounded the philosophy and merit of this path, and propounded the cult throughout the length and breadth of India.
> (pages 60-61-*Religion of Love And Devotion* by Lakshminath Bezbarua, edited by Maheswar Neog, published by Asam Sahitya Sabha).

The translator appropriately points out Gunabhiram's concern for women's emancipation and that at times he 'argues like a modern Marxist.' However, literary contributions of the *Jonaki* writers have not been recorded as adequately. They established Sankaradeva in the modern context, which, apart from making an assertion of the merit of indigenous tradition, encouraged an egalitarian social climate. And they introduced in Assamese

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literature genres like short stories, poems including sonnets, social satires and of course novels and plays. This confluence of Namghar (Vaishnava prayer hall and village assembly) of Assam, 'tea party' of Calcutta (Bezbarua mentions about it in his autobiography) and coffee-house of London facilitated the blossoming of the intellectual life of the Assamese middle-class. And if there was an exercise of 'resistance towards the Brahmo Dharma as an alien Faith from Bengal', it should be judged against the backdrop of the geo-political realities of the time, as Gunabhiram himself writes in the preface of *Ram Nabami*—'homeland' and 'foreign land' for Assam and Bengal respectively. Instead of acknowledging this historic role of *Jonaki*, she criticizes the '*Jonaki* group' for their 'strong reservation on the issue of women's emancipation'. She is particularly harsh on Lakshminath who in his autobiography mentions very little about the mother

> except the casually thrown in comment that she gave birth to her son in a sand bank on the Brahmaputra.... The travails of a childbirth under such hazardous circumstances do not seem to merit any sympathetic comment in the memoirs of her illustrious son.

Let us not blame 'Sahityarathi'(as Bezbarua is referred to in the Assamese literature.) for not weeping over his mother's labour pain. In the same autobiography he appreciatively mentions about Gunabhiram's daughter Swarnalata studying in Bethun school, "It was something new for an Assamese girl." He also respectfully mentions about Gunabhiram's wife Bishnupriya writing a book(*Nitikatha*) on moral issues, "It is noteworthy that an Assamese lady wrote such lucid prose some thirty five years ago." In the book he profusely laments his eldest daughter Surabhi's death at five years of age. Then there is the reference to his wife acting in a play staged in Calcutta.

Smt. Misra uses the words 'Ankia Nat' and 'Bhaona' almost synonymously. There is a clear difference between the two. Ankia Nat denotes the six plays by Sankaradeva where the language is Brajawali—which was an artificial literary language mixing Maithili and Assamese—and glorification of Lord Krishna is their all-pervading theme. But 'Bhaona', without the prefix 'Ankia', denotes those plays written by numerous playwrights in Eastern Assam region from the nineteenth century onwards. These are in Assamese and Krishna Bhakti is not always the theme.

The translator's remark—"The *Orunodoi* also helped in establishing a new secular trend in Assamese literature..." may appear confusing to readers particularly because of the use and abuse of the word 'secular' today. I quote Dr Satyendranath Sharma in this context, "...The mire

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and the muck of Assamese socio-religious life, their superstitions and so many other such problems do not find any reflection in the writings of these missionaries or in *Orunodoi*....Their purpose was not to awaken the patriotic feelings in the minds of the Assamese or to reform the society without taking recourse to Christianity." (*Asamiya Sahityar Samikhyatmak Itibritta*) Dr. Sharma further said that the constructive appeals of the likes of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan are not the 'chorus of *Orunodoi* literature,' but 'solo tunes only.' Readers are distracted from this fact by the word 'secular' (it is also used in some other places) which did not exist in the cerebration of the period analysed.

Regarding the translation of the play, the translator notes at the threshold the challenges involved in the task. She is very right in observing the region-wise and social stratum-wise difference of Assamese at the time.(Such differences are discernible even today.) It is also to be noted that Assamese writers in the mid to late nineteenth century could not dissociate their literary pursuit from their endeavour and responsibility of defining a modern Assamese prose for formal public discourse and library purpose. Their problem was compounded by the fact that the initially only available public forum — *Orunodoi* — was owned by American Baptist missionaries who had not arrived there primarily to devise a code for modern Assamese orthography and syntax. In the preface it has been analysed how the journal initially discouraged the use of Sanskrit-based literary Assamese, a stand they had to withdraw and agree to the style and spellings approved by the 'Assamese learned men.' *Ram Nabami* was written in this period of conflicting initiatives.

In view of all these factors, readers would appreciate her intention to 'give the translation a flavour of the source text.' Retaining some of the vulgarized construction is also understood. But literal translation of some proverbs like 'ripen a banana in instant with a strong blow of my fist' or 'the wind opens the door and bachelor gets the blame' is laughable. Again to put brother/sister- in- law for various kinship terms is too flat, as in Assamese, like any other Indian language, there are more than half a dozen variants for each. At times it gets ludicrously different from the original. When Nabami learnt that Ram was Jayanti's cousin, she requested the former to make her 'zaa'—which in Assamese means husband's brother's wife. But it has been translated as 'do what you can'(Act ii, scene v). Things get horrible in Act v, scene ii. The words 'dom' and 'dumuni', though used in the original, should not have been retained as these are supposed to be derogatory now-a-days. The translator made it further messy by using 'fisher-woman' for 'dumuni' on one occasion. Again 'koni' in original means 'egg'. Translator made it opium ('kani').

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These are only some of the examples that betray the translator's inadequate homework and poor understanding of the source text. The reader is left with a feeling that the translator's interest in the background of the book has not been matched by her care for the play itself. On the whole one is not encouraged to conclude that the translation has succeeded to a reasonable extent in presenting a historic work from the formative period of modern Assamese literature to the international readership.

Amritjyoti Mahanta

Snake Catcher by Naiyer Masud, tr. by M U Memon, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2006. Pp.xiii+243. Rs.250

When Naiyer Masud appeared on the Urdu literary scene with his first collection of short stories, *Simiya* in 1984 it was nothing less than an event. Readers and critics had to sit up and take notice. The stories were entirely different from what the Urdu readers have experienced earlier. They were neither like the realist story of the thirties and the forties, nor like the symbolic/abstract story of the seventies of the twentieth century. The language, the atmosphere and even the characters appeared markedly different from the mainstream Urdu fiction. There is no beginning, middle or end in the traditional sense of the terms. There is very little action. The melancholy, brooding ambience that pervaded the stories made critics accuse him of morbidity, a charge the author confronted squarely by asserting that if a character's life is morbid it should be depicted as such, without inserting cheerfulness into it. After *Simiya* Masud produced two other collections—*Itr-e Kafoor* (1990) and *Taus Chaman ka Maina* (1997)—scaling new heights in his fictional art and inviting comparisons with Kafka, Poe and Dostoevsky. By his own admission, he is a self-conscious writer, painstakingly working his language, and ruthlessly excising a greater part of his drafts to arrive at the final version, which inevitably, gestures towards a wider universe than that articulated in the canvas of particular stories.

Snake Catcher contains eleven stories selected from the three collections mentioned above representing different facets of Masud's art as a storyteller. The volume opens with a compelling, coming of age story of the adolescent

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narrator who encounters domains of fear and desire in all the houses he inhabits from time to time and the women that come to his life, and finally, his voluntary decision to give up speech. The story also demonstrates Masud's fascination for houses—abandoned, dilapidated, run down—with mysterious niches and dark corners.

> I returned to the houses I had seen many times and located these domains of fear and desire. No house, whether old or new, nor one among many of the same basic design, was without these domains. Looking for these domains of fear and desire became a vocation with me...(p 13)

"Ganjefa" is about the tenuous relationship of a mother with her worthless son, a dependent, who lived off the earnings of his mother till she died, and the mother's dream about her son. It is also as much about Ladlay, an eccentric but loveable hawker of medicinal wares who sold his Badshahi *manjan*, famed to have magical powers, in the Sunday market at Nakhkhas where a large crowd is irresistibly drawn to him as he holds forth on the potency and efficacy of an impressive array of herbs. "Resting Place" is about an itinerant medicine man who knew the healing power of herbs. After a lot of wanderings this healer finds a resting place in the house of his host who has an unkempt garden that contains several precious herbs which the healer uses to cure patients. However, what stays with the reader after having read the story is the curious relationship between the host and the guest which Masud builds up with incredible lightness of touch. This story also illustrates Masud's careful use of space which can be found in quite a few other stories. This space is often constricted and claustrophobic. "... And the ceiling of my resting place feels as though it's right on top of my chest." In "Weather Vane" the story revolves around a dysfunctional weather vane, apparently a useless object but Masud's uncanny imagination makes it the primary pivot around which revolves the quotidian of a family. Its presence in the story is so powerful that it assumes the dimension of a character.

Masud's characters are quaint figures—eccentric, anaemic, introvert, yet loveable. They are not consumed by the daily grind of 'getting and spending' but live a life of their own. Often there is a faint social context, but it is never adequate to explain the way they are and their ruling obsessions. They are not familiar figures that you might encounter on the street yet they do not seem to be entirely improbable. Though somewhat remote from the daily experiences they are not beyond the pale of normality. "Custody" is about the Nauroz family. For several generations 'these people

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had some genetically inherited condition which cause every Nauroz to eventually lose his mind.' The story deals with one member of this family. The first person narrator describes how he slowly goes out of his mind, how his shop also begins to look crazy, how he disappears leaving behind two female babies, how the narrator is drawn to them and rears them up, how the 'mad' Nauroz appears to the narrator intermittently, and finally, how the question of the custody of the girls is settled. All this is narrated in a characteristically dead pan voice implying that these are the most common occurrences. This story also demonstrates Masud's penchant for mixing reality and fantasy, what one may fashionably call 'magic realism.'

Masud's forte in building up the atmospherics with consummate skill can be seen in the title story which is about a professional snake catcher, a Shaman-like figure. The young narrator who was bitten by a snake and saved from death by the snake catcher, inadvertently, becomes his assistant, and notices with wonder and awe how the snake catcher is summoned by people, in their hour of distress and the procedure that allows him to draw out poison from human bodies saving many lives. However, with the passage of time, the power of the snake catcher wanes and finally, one day the narrator finds his corpse lying amidst the bodies of many snakes with crushed hoods. The snake catcher's role and social function allows the reader to guess the cultural context and the tenor of life lived by communities of people only dimly hinted by the narrator. About the atmosphere that characterises his stories, this is what Masud has to say:

> ...this peculiar 'atmosphere' may have resulted also from the fact that my own thoughts are never entirely clear to me. The vagueness with which they occur to me imparts, inevitably, a diffuse, dream-like quality to the words I marshal to convey those thoughts. This would explain why the atmosphere appears unfamiliar. I won't deny that sometimes the stories give the impression of being from another time and place. Nevertheless they are drawn from this very life.[1]

The English translation of the stories is consistently good and readable. But that is only to be expected. Muhammad Umar Memon is known to be a translator of great distinction. He has been instrumental in introducing the best of Urdu writers in the West. If Intizar Husain

1. Asif Fanukhi. "A Conversation with Naiyer Masud" AUS, 12, p. 267

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and Naiyer Masud have acquired new constituencies of global readership in English and are now regarded as significant writers of the Indian subcontinent the credit largely goes to Memon. Till a few years ago, Masud was known only to a limited circle of Urduwallahs. Now he is known globally, thanks to Memon's pioneering translations. The current volume has endorsements from writers of the stature of Agha Shahid Ali and Amit Chaudhuri. It can be safely speculated that Masud's works will enjoy an 'afterlife' in English translation, more magnificent in many ways, than their life in the original. We must also find a way to accord recognition and reward to such translators who often, single-handedly, do much more to promote our literature, language and culture beyond their native habitats than many institutions, with generous funding, do.

M. Asaduddin

Seeking the Beloved by Shah Abdul Latif, tr. by Anju Makhija and Hari Dilgir, New Delhi, Katha 2005, Pp. 285. Rs.295

One of the books that has been on my shelf for sometime and which I pick up, read, get lost in it, float in its high rhythms and then put in down again is *Seeking the Beloved*, the English translation of the Sindhi original *Shah Jo Risalo*. Anju Makhija and Hari Dilgir, each known for perfectionist qualities in their own field, have collaboratively translated the verses, providing the reader with a fine selection. So much so that it holds one and draws one into its mystic poetry of desire, search and belonging.

One is compelled to ask the question—what is it that holds the mind and imagination of the reader? And others that follow in quick succession are related to its relevance to our times, the need for an English translation and the significance of this particular one. The search for answers takes one to several areas: history, religion, emotion, music and the very nature of love itself.

The verses reflect on the nature of human existence, its meaning and its continued search for the all-enveloping presence. I am not particularly of a religious mind, yet Sufism and the Bhakti movement have always found a ready response in me. As Motilal Jotwani, himself a renowned Sindhi scholar, has observed in his comprehensive introduction, Sufism

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is for all times, and Shah Abdul Latif for all humanity. It is amazing to see the intricate knowledge that the sufi and bhakti poets had of music. *Shah Jo Risalo* is believed to have used thirty *surs*. Romantic imagery, with the devotee adopting a female voice, is in abundance. Devotion and surrender are synonyms; separation is pain but suffering is the self-cleansing necessary for the final union. As is evident, the code that rejects fixity, ritual and pleasure, goes on to define freedom and liberation anew.

Motilal Jotwani points out the affiliation with Vedantic thought. But to my mind, it is even necessary to enter into that, for the poetry creates its own world. The absence of a religious dogma helps them find God in every nook and corner, to go ahead and strike a friendly, complaining, bargaining and nudging relationship with him and to wrap him within one's own self. The individual devotee, moving simultaneously both inwards and outwards, is caught in a conscious dialogue, resulting in a rejection of the outer world. These are the processes that prepare him for the merger with the beloved.

It is difficult to confine Sufism to a single concept. Saints and poets have constantly widened its area. Shah Abdul Latif, himself a seventeenth century poet (1689-1752) invested his poetry with emotional appeal. He turned to many a folk tale. In this selection we have some; of these *Sasui-Punhoon* is one and *Leela-Chanesar*, a variation of the love-sacrifice theme, is another. The latter is a story of married love, its failure in the face of material beauty, subsequent separation and suffering and a final union. There are also others like *Moomal-Rano* which treats of same sex love, *Sohini and Mehar* (popularly also known as *Sohini-Mahiwal*), a story of tragic love. There is another one of *Umar Marui* where the rejected lover uses a rich suitor to avenge his own rejection.

The wide range of love relationships that often end in tragedy, shake free of the normative patterns and go on to project death as a union or a merger with the beloved thus denying the finality of death. But, at the same time, some traditional value structures do find a reflection, such as chastity. The translators have very wisely provided brief summaries of the folk tales used and it would be rewarding to work out the gender relationships in non-Sufi terms, locating them in socio-psychological interpretation. Alternative role models, social relationships that question social structures, women with a will of their own are familiar features of Sufi thought and Makhija's inspirational moment at the Kutch conference, which launched the process of this translation, has brought this to our attention.

A word about the translation. True, the Urdu-Hindi knowing reader

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can discern the original words/proverbs in their English equivalent, but that perhaps is a virtue. When the word 'friend' occurs, swiftly our mind shifts to 'yaar', or we recollect that a lover with his head in his hands is actually carrying his '*jaan hatheli par*'. The crescendo, the rise and fall of the rhythms has been finely transferred. Let me quote a few verses as evidence of this as well as the range of emotion.

He is
that
this

life
death

friend
enemy

breath of breath
is he

(p 33)

and

if you want love
go to the tavern

cut the head
place it in the barrel
drink brave one
drown in the draught

this lethal drink is cheap
in exchange for the head

(p.37)

Pain and suffering are an inevitable prelude to union; the beloved "stabs me/ with his knife." The greed of love is forgiveable: "when he invites you/for a drink / gulp like a camel / none can enter / uninvited (p63). The poet advises contrariness: hold a steady inward gaze / swim contrary to the world's ways / choose to go upstream/while others float downstream (p.112). There is sense in "moving towards the void" (115), for that alone is all. The landscape of Sindh, camels, crows, swans—all find their way into *Shah Jo Risalo* as the worldly and other-worldly are juxtaposed.

Makhija and Dilgir deserve congratulations for an additional reason and that is a love for Sindhi language, culture and history, for languages alone keep people alive and together. Katha's volumes are high in production

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values, this one is no exception. Geeta Dharmarajan has designed a very appropriate cover. If the past is of importance to us, the past we need is one that shows us how to connect. Shah Abdul Latif's verses do just that, and translations connect languages, cultures and temporal spaces.

Jasbir Jain

Vijay Tendulkar's Plays, An Anthology of Recent Criticism, ed. by V.M. Madge, Pencraft International, Delhi, 2007, Pp.184, Rs.380

> Umakant (picking up the tin-opener from the side-table). Let go of me, Manik! Let go! (She is only pretending to hold him back) I'll knock the bastard's block off! I'll crack him open like a cockroach! Let go of me! Let me go! I'll kill the pimp! Let go! Ramakant. Fine one you are to come and kill me! I'll bash your bloody brains out! Filthy bloody bastard! Let him go, Manik. Let go of him!

The uninitiated may imagine this to be a street brawl of ruffians or gangsters, resorting to unbridled expletives in lewd and filthy language, unable to settle an issue and ready to fight it out. But no. This is a dialogue between two brothers in the presence of their sister in their house. Ramakant is the elder and Umakant the younger sibling while Manik is the sister in Vijay Tendulkar's explosive play, *The Vultures* ('Gidhade'). It is a ruthless commentary on human conduct, verging on the inhuman, with its obnoxious tendencies to violence, avarice and sex. It goes morbid in the portrayal of its characters and action while highlighting their decadence in a realistic depiction of the middle class milieu caught in a degenerative vortex.

Ramakant and Umakant who have already received their shares of their father's wealth want to extract the maximum from him and even fight each other for money. Manik who has also a vicious role in the covert conspiracy against their father has illicit relations with her paramour, the Raja of Hondur and conceives his child. The two brothers want to blackmail the Raja but are sorely disappointed to know that he has died of heart attack. They kick Manik in frustration and abort her. Manik, in a fit of jealousy, aborts Rama, Ramakant's wife who has conceived

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from Rajaninath. The latter is the illegitimate son of Papa Pitale. Rama and Rajaninath are the lone sane elements in the family but ironically they develop illicit relations. Rama wants to attain motherhood but is frustrated by his drunken and reckless husband Ramakant. A victim of the vicious happenings in the family, she feels attracted to Rajaninath, another victim of circumstances.

No wonder, A.P. Dani, in this anthology, has compared *The Vultures* with John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, a Jacobean revenge drama of love, intrigue and violence. Here the trouble arises because the Duchess loves Antonio, the honest steward of the court. Her brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, warn her against marrying him because of their royal blood, though Ferdinand later admits that he was interested in her property. She, however, marries him secretly which the brothers come to know. She is caught, tortured and killed along with two of her children. But destiny pays them back in their own coin. Ferdinand goes mad and Cardinal is killed. Antonio too is killed and his son inherits the dukedom of Malfi. However, the leitmotif here is revenge while most of the characters in *The Vultures* are driven by an avarice which knows no bounds. There are similarities in theme and imagery and propensity to violence and sex.

As V.B.Deshpande points out, Tendulkar in this play wants to bring out the vulture in men, particularly in their interpersonal relationships. Tendulkar does not wish to soft-pedal on this issue and is in no mood to compromise while portraying the characters vis-a-vis the theme boldly in all the brutal detail. But questions are sometimes raised as to how is it that he sees only the vulture in man and not the eagle? The answer could perhaps be that all his characters do not show vulturine tendencies. There are eagles too. Even in real life there could be only a few instances of people being entirely good or unredeemable bad. There are overlapping shades of varying quality which sometimes defy rigid categorization. There are likes of Rama and Rajaninath who are victims of circumstances but they are not rapacious or lethal in their reaction. Moreover, one cannot dictate to a writer something which is in his creative domain, shaped by his own observation and experience and guided by his own perceived object of writing.

This anthology attempts at a critical assessment of all the major plays of the eminent dramatist while focusing on his overriding concerns and creative craft. He has nothing to hide but everything to expose and present the social ills and evils in all their stark reality. But the desire to shock the audience at any cost as a radicalist stance may sometimes prove counter-productive. V.M. Madge cites *Sakharam Binder* as a case in point and clearly brings out the paradoxes inherent in the characterization. Sakharam proudly flaunts his non-conformist outlook while berating the

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husbands who almost conventionally exploit their wives in every possible way while depriving them of their basic freedom. He ostensibly, therefore, gives shelter to such hapless wives who have escaped from the clutches of cruelty. But this he does actually to satisfy his own sexual needs and meet his exacting demands. Moreover, the woman in his house has to remain indoors whenever there is a visitor and cannot speak to strangers. If it becomes necessary to speak to them she has to draw a veil over her face! In what way is the obscurantist Sakharam Binder then different from the husbands he criticizes?

It may also be argued, of course, that such inconsistencies cannot be ruled out as implausible, particularly when the aim is to expose the selfish nature of a character who has one set of rules for himself and a different one for the others to follow, all for the sole purpose of serving his own interests at any cost. The hollowness of Sakharam's claims of being a non-conformist is exposed when he expects Laxmi to observe orthodox manners. Morever, he is downcast and his discomfiture is endless when the domineering Champa enters the scene and goes on giving her own commands, thus pushing him at the receiving end in an attempt at role reversal. Though the God-fearing Laxmi has a benign influence on him he prefers the voluptuous Champa to meet his physical demands and ultimately kills her for getting too close to Dawood Miyan and having sexual relations with him.

Neela Bhalla speaks of the dynamics of power manipulation in *Ghashiram Kotwal* where the eponymous character uses his innocent daughter Gauri to secure him the post of Kotwal in his lust for power and goes on committing excesses of cruelty. The predator ultimately becomes the prey and Ghasiram is stoned to death. He is outsmarted by the wily Najia Phadnavis who uses machiavellian tactics to get rid of the Kotwal.

N.S.Dharan has elaborated how the mock-trial in *Silence! The Court is in Session* turns the playful Miss Benare serious and dumbfounded when she is abruptly charged with infanticide under the Indian Penal Code. Jyoti Havnurkar brings out the instances of levity and seriousness in this well-known play. The seemingly inquisitorial nature of the mock-trial is not without its funny side. Apart from the pan-chewing activities in the so-called court, Ms. Benare, though a defendant in the case requests that the charge of infanticide be converted into robbery of public property. The oath is taken not on the Gita, as per the usual practice, but on the Oxford English Dictionary! The short piece on *Kamala* by Vikram Gokhale, Kalindi Deshpande's comments on Vijay Tendulkar's treatment of women characters, Shanta Gokhale's 'Tendulkar on his own terms',

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Vijay Tendulkar's conversation with Gowri Ramnarayan and the other contributions are noteworthy. Vikram Gokhale refers to his serious objections to Tendulkar's treatment of characters in *Kamala*.

The objective of this anthology is to present a balanced picture of the oeuvre in a dispassionate assessment. It is a commendable endeavour. The appendices at the end of the text are richly informative. Needless to say, in his innovative treatment of the themes while presenting a modernist vision, Vijay Tendulkar, the doyen of Marathi drama, ranks with Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali and Girish Karnad in Kannada literature. Apart from its appeal to a wide spectrum of the pan-Indian readership, this judiciously compiled anthology in English has a well-deserved global reach, facilitating glimpses into the treasure trove of regional writing in India in a proper perspective.

M.N. Chatterjee

Benign Flame: A Saga of Love by B.S.Murthy, Self-imprint, Distributed by Jaico, Hyderabad-27, 2006, Pp.400, Paper Back, Rs 150/-

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An engineer by training and a loss assessor and planner by profession B.S.Murthy published three novels and two books of non-fiction, *Puppets of Faith, Theory of Communal Strife, Bhagavadgita Treatise of Self-help* and *Sundara Kanda: Hanuman's Odyssey. Benign Flame: Saga of Love* is his first novel followed by *Crossing the Mirage* and *Jewel-less Crown Saga of Life.*

Often we find writers, poets and novelists spelling out their credo of creativity in their respective genres. These may be construed as the statements of their conviction and applied to their own ouvre for assessment and understanding. The statement of Murthy's credo revealed to a journalist followed the publication of his long fiction. "For any fiction to impact readers, it must be the soulful tale of a people steeped in their native soil, and not a hotchpotch of characters assembled in makeshift tents laid with cross-cultural pegs." While setting aside the innuendo in the later half of the statement, one can see that the writer is as good as his word going by the first part. The 'major' characters furnish their soulful tale and they are steeped in their soil: the lush Konaseema region of Andhra Pradesh. However this does not appear to be adherence to Nativism as a standpoint of the writer. The avowed intention of the

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novelist was to put across the idea that concupiscence could transform itself to the sublime and hence benign becomes the flame of love. *Amor vincit omnia.*

Faithful to the author's credo, the story line winds round the soulful tales of the central characters Roopa, Sandhya, Raja Rao and the inconsequent Tara. All these are from Hyderabad and Konaseema. Roopa is the daughter of a village postmaster. She has a primarily romantic temperament and to begin with, dreams of becoming a doctor. The love affair of her elder sister, Chandrika, with a man outside her caste, drives Roopa to wedlock in a hurry (lest Chandrika's exogamous marriage should spoil the prospects of her own owing to social taboos) with a small functionary in the government. The not romantic enough young groom tells her on the night of consummation that he cannot help her realize her dream. He debases himself and dies early. Roopa's friend, daughter of a Class I officer, marries Raja Rao, an architect in distant Delhi. The events in the story do not flow like a fortuitous concatenation of events but as manipulations of imagination deliberately to bolster the hypothesis that carnal love eventually leads to purgation and sublimation in the marriage of souls.

Moralistic value judgements apart, a book needs to be judged within the premises of the writer. It is fair to give the novel a patient reading, which includes the acceptance of the premises no matter how far-fetched they are. One man – one woman has been the ideal in sexual relation and the Indic culture is built on this tenet as one of its cornerstones. There are pornographic novels, avowedly, deliberately yellow. But here is a novel, which is a challenge even to complaisant lovers of either sex. *Menage a trois* has always been looked upon as a deviance and not a norm. But permissiveness has come to be the order of this age to the extent of making the whole code of human conduct warranting rewriting in the light of large-hearted permissiveness of human behaviour.

Charting the regions of sexuality without being prurient is no mean task. The unexpurgated version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* received open and loud applause after the proscriptions were successfully lifted. But in this novel more things have to be accepted: lesbianism, and libertine, libidinous wanton orgies. True, earlier, Graham Greene, did make an assertion (through a lovely character Martha in *The Comedians:* "Perhaps the sexual life is the great test, if we survive it with charity to those we love and with affection to those we have betrayed, we needn't worry so much about the good and bad in us." But then the charity we come across in this novel under review becomes a matter of individual understanding and possible acceptance.

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Here are the soulful interior monologues and statements of the important characters:

'By the way, is the same-sex syndrome abnormal?' She (Roopa) asked herself. 'After all, what's the yardstick to judge it? Why, both of us have (Sandhya and herself) the same intimate want, and suffer when we can't have it. And when we make it, don't we go to the depths of sexual delight and reach the heights of sensual ecstasy? Won't our souls merge with our bodies to communicate our mutual craving in lovemaking? Above all isn't our love our life-force?' (p.83)

'Is this fascination for Tara owing to my lesbian leanings?' Roopa began contemplating. 'Oh, I am a bisexual by disposition? No, I can't be. After all, it was only my distress that triggered that union with Sandhya. Looks like Tara is no less enamoured of me. Could she be a lesbian by any chance? If it comes to the shove, it won't be an unwelcome development, would it?' (p.88)

'What is the contradiction, if while leading my love life with Raja (Roopa asks hersef), I look after Sathyam's marital needs as well? It seems to be the only sensible way to go about life than feel deprived all my life.' (p.185)

'Life in a nutshell is challenging as well as charming,' said Chandrika. 'It's as though the complexities of life are compounded in exogamous marriages. At times, it feels that the risk was worth taking, and on occasion, it seems it's all a bad bargain. There would be depressing moments to go through as well as exciting things to gloat over.' (p.132)

'In lesbianism with Roopa, (thought Sandhya) our bodies enthuse our souls, but in coition with Raja, oh, our bodies and should come to fuse.' (p.155)

'It's time you know some home truths about us women,' said Tara making Roopa sit in the sofa. 'The radar of male eyes is sure to pick up the unmistakable signals emanating from unhappy women. And in her married life, a woman is either satisfied or dissatisfied, that's all there is to it. Thus, if someone persists with a married woman for some time, it's a sure sign of her own vacillation.' (p.268)

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Having quoted to this extent, there is no further need to dwell on the more lurid details of lovemaking particularly lesbian as described on page 79.

Charting the regions of sexuality in individuals who could be typical cases of nymphomania and satyriasis, the author endeavors to scale the peaks of benign understanding. Looking for a portrayal of the human condition in this novel would yield only dissatisfaction to the reader since the author's guns are trained elsewhere.

The problem that bothers the serious reader — this novel does demand a measure of seriousness on the part of the individual intimately personal reader — is one of arriving at his own conclusion. When 'values' undergo total transformation and individualism and fancy rules, new concepts and new ways of living become natural and may even become acceptable. For the very pensive readers it may strike that the novel, for some reason, has not come to the point where mere carnal love is convincingly sublimated as a union of souls, for what matters is Love which per se is not sex-related at all. One needs a saint's eye view to comprehend this kind of 'reality' remembering St Juliana of Norwich:

> Sin is behovely
> All shall be well
> And all manner of things.

V.V.B. Rama Rao

Astride the Wheel by Chandrasekhar Rath, tr. by Jatindra K Nayak, Oxford University Press, Delhi, Rs.245

Astride the Wheel is an exotic novel. The title (original Oriya: *Yantrarudha*) owes to the Hindu Scriptures: an assertion of supremacy of divinity on the functioning of the human machine. Sanatan Dase, the impoverished priest-protagonist of the novel, parrots a line only too often: Can a man do anything on his own? Everything is the doing of providence.

Yet, given a choice, I would go by the human part of it all. I would commend Sanatan Dase, the fifty-year-old temple priest – the householder of a family of eight – for his successful stint with domesticity in the face of poverty; his tenacity to grab an occasional opportunity to earn some money for a month's work away from his wife and children

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– so that his debts are repaid respectably. I would empathize with his feeling of impotence as he makes a sacrifice of his patriarchal ego in inviting a reluctant *vaidya* over to treat his ailing wife and son, with a word of recommendation from his 'rival' in the village, as he wouldn't be able to remunerate the greedy physician. I would share his intense melancholy and rejoice in his muted pleasures—would extol his ability to allow his tropical wit to overcome his sense of realities of deprivation. Because I, as a campaigner of autonomy of literature, would not subordinate literature to an ideological agenda.

At the end of the day, however, *Astride...* is a Hindu novel ensconcing the old, Spartan world of Dase, where deprivation and death are incidental contingencies. He cannot grudge his penury as he has been bequeathed priesthood by his forefathers and conditioned to believe in the workings of providence ('Well, this is how God wants it to be'... it is He who provides for everyone and everything', p. 2). For him, householding is both an end and illusion—*maya*. An unshaken faith in the unseen as well as his Hindu spirit helps him cement the porous borders between gratification and denial. He believes in rituals; is willing to lose himself in deliberations on metaphysics; resorts to hymns and songs from scriptures and chanting of gods' names when he is down. He is critical of Nilakantha Mishra, the haughty well-off, ice-head, whom he considers his opponent and yet indulges, though loosely, in the latter's claim to arrogance of the upper caste. The description of the last rites of Dase's wife is detailed. His own death, like his story of shortages, is protracted amid his pilgrimages through the holy shrines of the country. He falls back on his wisdom in the frequent bouts of fancy, where the poignant and the frivolous –the contradictions of life—leak into each other as they do in real life.

As a piece of creative writing, this novel will survive in the grace of its protagonist. For Dase, an exotic world of spiritual freedom lurks somewhere nearby; all the same he never loses track of his immediate society and its dynamics. He rationalizes endlessly that man is powerless before fate and hence the rich and the poor are but the same mortal; yet he finds it hard to come to terms with the death of his wife and son. He has an opinion on everything, and the reader is treated to slices of realism of an Orissan village: evening recitals of scriptures, petty squabbles among communities, rivalry of one-upmanship, caste prejudice, election campaign, peasant cunningness, corruption, healthcare...He laments occasionally on human frailties. He detests Brunda Nahak, the lower class tax collector who calculates his way to be among the political people and lures the villagers to vote for the political party of his interest. Dase believes that sex is for giving birth to progeny, procreation the rule of

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the world, and squarely rubbishes the government's steps for birth control. The author even carves out a scope for amusement in the delineation of his protagonist ('Tell me how can you control birth? Again just because people want to live in comfort and eat well, should no one else be allowed to take birth?' p. 65) and raises him beyond the mundane. The realism in the text is commonplace, yet it stands on its own, possibly because of the proximity of the novelist to the world he describes. The anecdotes, in their obliqueness, are credible: the good old world where news would not reach places for a month though you could get a towel for five rupees—in sparse sketches these real worlds of the here-and-now blend into the esoteric ambience of the narration.

The elevation of the protagonist to the poetic height takes place even without the novel's explicitly profound end. This part stretches through four chapters where the protagonist transcends his material link decisively and moves to the realm of the sublime and mystique to embrace death. Because there is dependability about the evolution of the character. His countless ruminations on fate and soul and fulfillment and denial can, in a sense, masquerade as his robust optimism. His apparently abrupt change of heart to renounce the world following the death of his wife has, in real, been worked out from very early in the text (ch. 'Initiation'). In fact, Dase's recurrent psychic juxtapositions of materialism and spiritualism as soon as we are introduced to the character, does lend a clue to his probable attainment of salvation in the end of the novel.

Astride...has the staple features of an Indian language novel of the 1960s: a post-Independence Indian village awakening to the charms of modernity, as the locale; an ordinary family man as the central character, and the little narratives of his rites of passage as content. In addition, there is a four-chapter-long picaresque description of some of the Hindu spiritual places. Yet *Astride*... is a local novel, of a village in Orissa with references to the places and sociology of Orissa. Like most Oriya novels of the 1960s, the protagonist of the novel inhabits a faceless world of poverty and triviality, and the narration is largely linear. Yet unlike its siblings, the novel does not betray an obsession with poverty, does not resent exploitation or an exploiter or talk of caste hierarchies or other social ills per se. The tone is matter-of-fact. The narration is visibly non-categorical and away from moralizing.

The novel is brilliantly structured. Events are not summaries; they take place in dialogues of characters. Almost in a picaresque manner. This is true of even inconsequential events. Since most of the characters and occurrences in the text conduct through the observer's eyes of Sanatan Dase, the authorial distance is never a point of contention. It falters only

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very scarcely. Characters are portraits, not sketches, and at least a dozen characters are delineated with elaborate authenticity. The author is for the most part non-judgmental. Characters enjoy the same aesthetic treatment - Brunda Nahak, the crook as well as Satpathy Mahasaya, Dase's alter ego who initiates and helps realize Dase's spiritual odyssey. In the linear unfolding of the plot, there is variation in tone. The chapter 'A Prayer' where Dase is losing his wife and son to an undiagnosed fever is particularly arty, as it does not betray any intimations of mortality; the suspense is broken in the next chapter.

There can be any number of debates on the act of translation. I do not want to get into this. But one point is sure; the translator has gone for short cuts. As an example, 'khaira', the word that has been retained in original Oriya and has necessitated an entry in the glossary, has an English equivalent in 'catechu'. So have several other words. There has been a liberal use of Indian English through the rendering. To translate into English the linear, everyday prose of the original Oriya text with uniformity is a task in itself. The translator has invented his own unruffled approach.

Lipipuspa Nayak

Borough in the Mist by Sandeep Silas, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, Pp.88, Rs.200

Borough in the Mist is a collection of poems by Sandeep Silas who is making his mark as an Indian English poet. This is his second volume with 56 poems which bring forth Sandeep's poetic sensitivities in all their vividness with his own poetic signature.

As the poet says in his preface his poems grew within. "Each taking a different shape, a structure as definite and free as the thought, each speaking of the time it saw and soaked." Not only that. "He seeks to find, he seeks to love, he seeks to create, he seeks to bond."

In "Half a mountain" this is what one finds.

"Lose me not
On the touchstone of purity
For thine eyes alone
I live impure"

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He concludes the poem thus:

"Half this mountain glows in sun,
Half harbours shade—
Which half of me is yours
Choose thee with care."

The poet Silas chooses his words with tender care. It is not his intention to dazzle the reader or to blind him with his brilliance. He is one of those honest poets who tries to express, not to impress. The reader feels very comfortable in the company of the poet who in a trance whispers his poetic vibrations with the tenderness of a lover for his beloved.

There are many aspects of life that inspired the poet. Undoubtedly all these poems are spontaneous overflow of emotions because they give a feeling of a natural spring. He asks in "The Drought and Fire":

"Will you ever pause
beneath that tree,
Or your eyes look up in awe?
Will you ever touch that trunk,
shedding its bark,
Or lie under,
and dream?"

In many poems Sandeep Silas comes across like a nature poet, because that is what he basically is. With an observant eye, appreciative mind and joyful heart the poet absorbs and soaks in every beauty of nature not missing out on any nuances as if he were in deep meditation.

Make no mistake. There is a streak of spirituality as well. Reacting to human suffering he seeks divine intervention. In "Red Light Woman" he says:

Son of God has ascended His Heaven,
Full is Earth's Womb of plagues seven
Will ever again be born Lord Christ?
To care for downtrodden, to redeem life's tryst.

"A Small Wish" reconfirms the spiritual yearnings of the poet. A heart filled with devotion, with child-like innocence, the poet seems to lift his hands in prayer saying,

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Keep me by the threshold
Of My heavenly abode,
Grant me no more wishes
Save this one alone.

Reading this book is like wandering in the woods, all alone in communion with nature enjoying the simple pleasure of life. In the process you tend to lift your eyes heavenwards devoid of words but filled with ecstasy.

J. Bhagyalakshmi

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Our Contributors

Agarwal, Deepa. Writes poetry and fiction in English for both children and adults; also translates from Hindi into English; has about forty published books to her credit; her latest work is a collection of poetry titled *Do Not Weep Lonely Mirror*. Add: D-123 Preet Vihar, Delhi-110092.

Ali, Anvar. Young Malayalam poet; his collection of poems *Mazhakkalam* won him Kanakasree Endowment Award of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi in 2000; has translated *Toto-Chan* into Malayalam; he is also working as a film writer and a documentary film maker; co-wrote the script for *Maargam* (2003), a Malayalam film, which won various international, national, and state govt. awards; works with Kerala State Government; Now, Poet in Residence, in a literary organization of the Government of South Korea, till November 2007. Add: Jasmi Baug, Pottakkuzhy, East Pattom, Trivandrum 695 004

Asaduddin, M. (b.1959) Writes in Bangla, Urdu and English and translates from and into these languages; also knows Assamese, Hindi and French; teaches English Literature at Jamia Millia Islamia. Add: 90-S, Sector 8, Jasola Vihar, D.D.A. Flats, New Delhi 110 025.

Bhagyalakshmi, J. (b.1940) English and Telugu poet, critic, short story writer and translator; has published one collection each of poems and short stories. Add: A-13, 29B, Fortview Apartments, Kalkaji Extn. New Delhi 110 019.

Bhattarai, Anuradha. Writes in Nepali and translates from Nepali into Engish and vice-versa; presently teaches English at Darrang College, Tezpur 784 001, Assam.

Bihari, Pradip (b.1963) Maithili short-story writer, novelist, dramatist and editor; has four collections of short stories, two novels and one drama to his credit; recipient of Best Actor Award, Dinkar Janapadiya Samman; presently associated with State Bank of India. Add: Menakayan, New Colony Ulao, PO-Ulao, Dist. Begusarai 851 134, Bihar

Bihari, Pranav. Translates from Maithili to English; theatre artist by

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profession, presently working as Asst. Editor, *Antarang*. Add: C/o Dr. Deo Shankar Navin, Editor (Hindi), National Book Trust, A/5 Green Park, New Delhi 110 016.

Bodke, Narendra. Translates from Marathi into English. Add: B-63/ DSX Chintamani, Agga Balwant Chowk, Shaniwar Peth, Pune 411 030, Phone No. 400 3726

Chatterjee, M.N. Freelance writer and critic. Add: 202 Jaijaiwanti, Asiatic Enclave, Vartak Nagar, Thane (W) 400 606, Maharashtra.

Chatterjee, Nilima. Indian English poet; presently working as Lecturer in English, Priyadarshini Women's College, Rourkela. Add: HIG-B/74, Chhend, Phase-III, Rourkela 769 015.

Chaturvedi, Sudhanshu. Distinguished multilingual scholar in Sanskrit, Hindi, Malayalam and English; his works in Malayalam and Hindi, including translations between the two languages, and from Sanskrit into Malayalam, are much acclaimed; has the rare honour of winning the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for a book in Malayalam, won by a non-Malayalee writer; winner of more than 15 other awards including the Vidyavaridhi Award and Vachaspati Award; lived in Kerala for more than three decades and retired as Principal, Sreekerala Varma College, Trichur, Kerala. Add: F-267, Street No. 21, Laxmi Nagar, Delhi 110 092

Gadgil, Gangadhar. Eminent Marathi fiction-writer and former Vice-President of Sahitya Akademi. Add: 4, Abhang, Sahitya Sahawas, Madhusudan Kalelkar Marg, Bandra (E), Mumbai 400 051

Gadvi, Praveen (b.1951) Gujarati Dalit poet, short-story writer and a Civil Servant by profession; has three collections of poems in Gujarati to his credit; his poems have also been translated into English, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu and Kannada. Add: G-17, Someshwar Complex, 132 Fitno Road, Satellite, Ahemdabad 380 014.

Ghosh, Anuradha. Working in the Department of English at Hansraj College, Delhi. Add: J3/204, DDA Flats, Kalkaji, New Delhi, 9350184187 (M)

Jain, Jasbir (b.1937) Professor of English and critic; has more than 10 published works to her credit; recipient of Henry Chapman Award, 1993, from Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London. Add: 89, Jai Jawan Colony, Scheme III, Jaipur 302 018.

Jain, Tripti. Freelance translator; recipient of Katha-British Council South Asian Translation Award for her translation from Punjabi into

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English. Add: 25, Onkar Nagar, Kokhale Marg, Civil Lines, Ajmer 305 006.

Jayakumar, Prema. A senior translator of poetry and fiction from Malayalam to English; also writes articles and book reviews; joined State Bank of India as a Probationary Officer in 1975 and left service in 1995; has to her credit nine novels in English translation, with one of them, *The Unspoken Curse* by V. K. Madhavankutty, short listed for the Crossword Award 2005.

Joshi, Himanshu (b.1935) Well-known Hindi poet, fiction-writer and editor; has 13 collections of short stories; seven novels, two travelogues and two collections of poetry besides nine works of children's literature to his credit; has also edited *Selected Indian Short Stories*, *Selected Samanantar Short Stories*, *Cheer Ke Vano Se* etc; recipient of awards by UP Hindi Sansthan, Hindi Academy, Delhi and from Ministry of Human Resources Development (Govt. of India). Add: 7/ C-2 Hindustan Times Apartments, Mayur Vihar, Phase – I, Delhi 110 091.

Khayal, Ghulam Nabi (b.1939) Kashmiri poet and critic; has several published works to his credit; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award, J & K Cultural Academy Award, Al-Arab Poetry Award etc. Add: 15, Rawalpora Housing Colony, Srinagar 190 005, Kashmir

Kaul, Jiva Lal (1900-1975) Retired Principal of S.P. College, Srinagar; had authored one book in English titled, *Studies in Kashmiri*; also translated into English love lyrics of Kashmiri poetry.

Krishnan, Bindu. A scientist by profession; writes poetry and essays in English and Malayalam; she is based in Thrissur and can be contacted at bindukris@gmail.com. Add: Vijayasree, Mannath Lane, Thrissur 680 001.

Kulkarni, Anjali (b.1960) Marathi poet and essayist; her important works include, *Mi Ek Strijatiya Aswastha Atma* (poetry); recipient of Kavi Yashwant Puraskar, Yashwantrao Chavan Puraskar, Kusumtai Deshmukh Award etc. Add: B/20, Jhala Housing Complex, Gultekdi, Market Yard, Pune 411 037, Maharashtra.

Macwan, Yoseph (b.1940) Eminent Gujarati poet, short-story writer, critic and translator; have more than 13 published works to his credit; recipient of Gujarat State Award, Dr. Jayant Pathak Award etc. Add: C/4, Sunshine Apartments, Near Old Sachivalay, Ahmedabad 380 015.

Mahanta, Amritjyoti. Writer, critic and translator. Translates from English to Assamese and vice versa; works with Doordarshan. Add: S-112, Nivedita Kunj, R.K. Puram, Sector 10, New Delhi – 110 022.

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Marydas John. Asst. Editor with *The Hindu*; has a book, *The Confluene*, a biography of Sudhanshu Charurvedi, to his credit. Add: A179/GTB Hospital Campus, Dilshad Garden, Delhi 110092.

Mumtaz, Hameed. Retired Education Secretary to the POK Government; has a couple of books on Kashmir politics; also translates from Kashmiri into English; now living in Islamabad.

Muthuswami, Rohini. A scientist by profession who writes stories in English; her stories have been published both in India and abroad. Add: #238, 43rd Cross, 7th Main, 5th Block, Jayanagar, Bangalore 560041.Email: rohinimuthuswami @hotmail.com.

Nasreen, Farhat. Indian English poet; associated with Department of History and Cutlure, Jamia Millia Islamia. Add: Senior Warden, G.P. Girls Hostel, Jamia Millia Islamia, Maulana Mohammed Ali Jauhar Marg, New Delhi 110 025

Nayak, Lipipuspa. Critic and translator; translates from Oriya to English; has three published works to her credit; has directed a short film for television. Add: C/o Prof. R.B. Nayak, Lane – I, VIP Road, Bhadrak 756 100

Pandey, Udai Bhanu. Taught English literature at Diphu Government College, Karbi Anglong, Assam from where he retired as Principal; has published more than seven book in English and Hindi which include fiction, essays, and translations. Add: A-31, Mauvilla, Rodali Path, Odalbakra Laiganesh, Guwahati 781 034.

Pandya, Vijay. Translates from Gujarati to English. Add: 16 Readers' Residence, Gujarat University, Navrangpura, Ahmedabad 380 009

Panne Kunwar Bachchawat (b.1942) Painter; her specialized areas are Indian Gods and Goddesses; her paintings have been exhibited at Sardul Art Gallery, Bikaner, Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta, Sanskriti Art Gallery, Calcutta and Stuttgart, Germany. Add: 20, Balmukund Macker Road, Kolkata 700 007.

Paul, Biraj Kumar (b.1955) M.A. in painting from Rabidnra Bharti University, Kolkata; participated in various group exhibitions in Kolkata, Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, etc.; Member of International Forum for Artists.

Meenakshi F. Paul. Reader in the Dept of English, Himachal Pradesh University, Centre for Evening Studies; her interest is in folklore and translation and she is currently working on the folklore of Himachal; has one book of translated stories, *Short Stories of Himachal;* also writes poetry in Hindi and

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English. Add: Abbey Feale Lodge, Lakkar Bazar, Shimla 171001

Raina, Trilokinath (b.1922) Retired professor of English from the National Defence Academy of India; translates from Kashmiri to English. Add: B/8-46, Tridal Nagar, Yerawada, Pune 411 006

Rajeevan, T. P. Noted bilingual poet, fiction-writer, critic and translator, in Malayalam and English, with several volumes of poetry, one work of fiction (being serialized in the prominent literary and social Malayalam weekly *Maatrubhoomi)*; took part in the prestigious International Writing Programme of Iowa University, U.S.A., and in several international poetry festivals like the one in Struga, Macedonia; was Editor of Yeti Books, Calicut, Kerala, a publishing house noted for its top-class English books, which he pioneered; now, the guiding spirit of Monsoon Editions, an equally competent publishing house; working as Public Relations Officer, Calicut University, Kerala. Add: B-6, Jeevan Bima Nagar, Karaparamba, Calicut 673 006.

Rao, V.V.B. (b.1938) A retired ELT professional, has published several books and numerous articles both in English and Hindi to his credit. Add: C-7, New Township, BTPS, Badarpur, New Delhi 110 044.

Raza, Rahman. Reader in the Department of English, A.M.U., Aligarh. Add: B-2, Zainulabidin Road, Tar-Bungalore, A.M.U., Aligarh 202 001

Saha, Malay Chandan (b.1961) Participated in many solo and group shows in Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Bhopal, Lucknow, Amritsar, Nagpur, New Delhi, Patna and USA; recipient of Shilp Kala Parishad, Patna, Perfect Health Mela, WHO, New Delhi, Bombay Art Society, Mumbai, Awantika, New Delhi, SCZCC, Nagpur. Add: C/o D Saha Raja Road, Posukchar, Kolkata

Sarmah, Jayanta Krishna (b.1974) Writes poetry, short stories in Assamese, Nepali and translates from Assamese into Hindi and from Nepali into Assamese; some of his important works are *Karlar Karane Atopal Chakupani* (poems in Assamese), *Sadanko Majherima Matoko Bashna* (poems in Nepali) etc and his translation works are *Taksir Galpa* (stories of Takhazhi Shivashankara Pillai into Assamese), *Platform* (Neplai historical poem by K.B. Nepali) etc; recipient of Bharatiya Bhasa Sansthan National Integration Award by CIIL, Mysore, Ramdeo Sarmah Smriti Award by Assam Sahitya Sabha etc. Add: Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Darrang College, Tezpur 784 001, Sonitpur, Assam.

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Sarna, Surjit (b.1930) Punjabi poet, short story writer and translator; has more than 12 works, which include short stories, poetry, translations and monographs; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize, 1996. Add: S/88 Greater Kailash, Part II, New Delhi 110 001.

Shiva Prakash, H.S. (b.1954) Kannada poet and playwright; winner of Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award etc.; translates from Kannada into English; was formerly Editor, *Indian Literature*. Add: Associate Professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 110 067.

Singh, Ravi Kumar. Translates from Hindi to English. Ad: C/o Ashok Kumar Paul, R.K. Store, Near Lal Ganesh Temple, Lalganesh, Guwahati 781 034.

Sodhi, Navkirat (b.1979) Studied English Literature at the Delhi University and international journalism at the University of Westminster; she worked as a researcher and journalist for four years in London; in 2006 she moved to Delhi to pursue her interest in writing, broadcast media and travel. Add: K-2 Galaxy Apartments, Vikas Puri, New Delhi 110018. Email: navkirat @gmail.com

Sreekumar, E.P. Writes fiction in Malayalam; has one novel, *Maramudra* and *Kammeerpaatam* (Short story collections) to his credit; won several awards including Abudhabi Shakti Award (special), Current Books (DC) Golden Jubilee Novel Award, Puzha dot com Award, K.A. Kodungallur Award, first Gautha Books Award for short-story and White Line Journal, (Mumbai) Award. Add: Harisree, Canal Road, Tripunithura 682 301, Kerala. E-mail: pucb_gm@sify.com

Sud, Anil. Translates from Hindi to English. Add: A-23/6, Planet Health, DLF City, Phase-I, Gurgaon, Haryana 122 002

Surti, Abid. Well-known Gujarati fiction-writer, playwright; also writes Urdu poetry, scripts for Hindi films and children's books; has written around 80 books including 45 novels, 10 short-story collections and 7 plays; his fictional version of the *Devil's Bible* titled *The Black Book* created a nationwide controversy and was translated into seven languages and voted 'The Book of the Year' in Kannada; recipient of President's Award.

Taramangalam, Elzy: Writes short stories in Malayalam and poems in English; also translates from Malayalam to English. Add: 30, Hanover Court, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3M 3K6, Canada.

Thomas, A.J. (b.1952) Indian English poet with one collection of

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poems to his credit, also translates poems and fiction from Malayalam into English and vice-versa and reviews books; recipient of Katha Award, AKMG Prize and Crossword Award 2006; Editor, *Indian Literature*.

Tripathi Brajendra. (b.1955) Hindi poet and translator, witih two volumes of poetry, one collection of Gujarati poems in translation, Hindi translation of a Sindhi novel and Hindi translations of two Englsi novels. Joint Editor (Hon.) of *Sahitya Amrit* (monthly magazine); edited two books and a number of memorial volumes to his credit. Works as Deputy Secretary, Sahitya Akademi. Add.101 Arsh Complex, Sector-Alfa1, Greater Noida, Gautam Buddh Nagar Dist.201308, UP.

Uniyal, Ranu. Indian-English poet, also writes poetry in Hindi; teaches English at the University of Lucknow; has one book, *Women and Landscape: the Fiction of Margaret Drabble and Anita Desai* to her credit; recipient of Commonwealth Scholarship at the University of Hull.Add: B-503, Priyanka Apartments, Jopling Road, Lucknow 226 001.

Note

The correct spelling of the name of the writer of the short story "Brown Morning" published in IL239 (March-April 2007), is Franck Pavloff. The mistake was noticed only after plates were made. The same is regretted.

Editor

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'Literature reflects life' is an old truism we are all familiar with. But does it? Life has become so complex nowadays, especially in our cities, that any literature modelled on it would be as indecipherable and arbitrary, to put forward a simplistic argument. Equally unreal would be the other assertion – that any nativist-writing is true to life. However, the literature written in regions where life-and-death situations stare people in the face tends to be intrinsically truthful. The writers in such situations cannot take sides, because they know that truth is not there entirely with any of the warring parties. Therefore, the writers can be, at best, witnesses. This is what one could feel, as poets and fiction-writers from the Northeastern states read out their works in the programme organized by Sahitya Akademi on 7 September 2007 named "Echoes from the Land of the Seven Sisters." Five poets and two short-story writers from six languages took part in it: Arupa Patangia Kalita (short story-Assamese), Jyotshna Kalita (poetry-Assamese), Sudhir Naoroibam (short story-Manipuri), Lalnunpuia Hrahsel (poetry-Mizo), Anju Narzari (poetry-Bodo), Jogmaya Chakma (poetry-Chakma) and Shefali Debbarma (poetry-Kokborok). We carry in this issue the poems and stories read out by those among the participants who have not been published in *Indian Literature* in the recent past.

Kannada has contributed mightily to the literature of the country, talent-wise. In Sahitya Akademi alone, two presidents (V. K. Gokak, U. R. Anantha Murthy), two former editors of this journal (S. Balu Rao and H. S. Shiva Prakash) and the present Secretary, have come from Kannada. The maximum number of Jnanpith Awardees from any one of our literatures is a unique honour which Kannada can be proud of: seven of them—Bendre, Kuvempu (K. V. Puttappa), Masti Venkatesh Iyengar, K. Shivarama Karanth, V. K. Gokak, U. R. Anantha Murthy and Girish Karnad. Bilingual geniuses like A. K. Ramanujan, critical minds like D. R. Nagaraj, eminent writers who were also cultural vigilantes like P. Lankesh, voices of the oppressed like Siddalingaiah, give Kannada an exalted position. The earliest literary upsurge in any Indian language—Vachana poetry written nearly 800 years ago that reads (for me, in English translation) strangely contemporary throughout the ages and even now in the 21st century—is Kannada's own. One of the most vibrant of our literatures with its robust literary movements, Kannada is a language with its own sense of pride. This is what U. R. Anantha Murthy means when he talks about Kannada in his Samvatsar Lecture published in this issue.

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We are carrying a story by Sagarika Ghose, a leading segment of contemporary Kannada literature, which does not claim to be representative in any sense.

As soon as I took over the editorship, something that struck me as important was that *Indian Literature* has to become more topical. By publishing poems and stories read out in the programme, "Echoes from the Land of the Seven Sisters," the Samvatsar Lecture (The most important lecture delivered at the Sahitya Akademi during the entire year, as part of the Festival of Letters, is usually published in booklet form. We are carrying in our pages, this year's Lecture.), a Meet the Author Lecture, Travel Notes by eminent Indian English poet and fiction writer, Keki N. Daruwalla—literary accounts of his visits to Cuba and the poetry festival at Struga, Macedonia — and In Memoriam (in fact the only regular topical feature for sometime now), we have covered most of the main events of the past several months. *Indian Literature* being a bimonthly gives us a clear advantage: we get enough time to do a round up of all the main happenings in the world of letters, both celebratory and mournful. We have seen Doris Lessing get the Nobel Prize for literature and Anne Enright, the Man Booker Prize. Ronald Asher has become the Honorary Fellow of Sahitya Akademi; Kartar Singh Duggal, Ravindra Kelekar and Anita Desai were selected Fellows of the Akademi. Qurratulain Hyder, Gunturu Seshendra Sharma, both Akademi Fellows, and C. V. Sreeraman, Akademi Award-winning Malayalam short-story writer who is noted for his stories written mainly about life in the backdrop of the rest of the country, passed away. In this issue, however, we are carrying memorial sections on only Qurratulain Hyder and C. V. Sreeraman. Obituary section on Seshendra Sharma, celebratory sections on the Honorary Fellow and the Fellows, and subsequent Meet the Author lectures too would be carried in future issues.

Two Hindi writers who crossed their 80th year recently— Kunwar Narayan and Krishna Baldev Vaid—are noted in their own ways for the innovations they have brought to poetry and fiction, respectively. Girdhar Rathi, the former editor of *Samkalin Bharatiya Sahitya*, the bimonthly Hindi journal of Sahitya Akademi, pays tribute to Kunwar Narain through his translation of the latter's poems and an exclusive article that highlights his unique contributions as a poet and fiction-writer. Krishna Baldev Vaid has been celebrated by the release of *The Diary of a Maidservant*, the translation of his latest novel *Ek Naukarani ki Diary* by Sagaree Sengupta, published by OUP India; a review article on it would follow in a future issue.

Indian Literature in English Translation is a subject on which the Indira Gandhi National Open University has a Master's programme. Many other universities like the Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University

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have accommodated similar programmes in their English departments. The unavailability of text books containing good quality translations from our various literatures has been one of the factors that has gone against the salutary efforts of the advocates of the introduction of Indian Literature in English Translation, replacing at least some of the British Literature texts that students of English literature are to study here even after sixty years of Independence. Strangely, Indian writing in English has been growing in geometric proportions while translation from Indian languages into English has been beset with problems like a lack of good translators who have excellent command over the original and target languages involved and dedicated editors. For some years now, mainstream publishers have come forward to publish works of translation of international standards, roping in the services of the best minds in this field. However, text books of Indian Literature in English Translation, as I said earlier, have been very hard to come by. It is in this context that *Short Fiction from South India: Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu* from OUP India, edited by Subashree Krishnaswamy and K.Srilata, catches our attention. The Introduction by Mini Krishnan is a fascinating piece that gives the readers an understanding of what is really at stake.

The 800th birth anniversary of Jalaluddin Rumi has been celebrated on 30th September, 2007 the world over. Rumi served directly or indirectly as a source of inspiration for the great Sufi poets of India, who, along with our Bhakti poets, laid a foundation—alongside our ancient traditions—on which was built the superstructure of our great mystical tradition in the literatures of later times; he is a living presence for a great number of writers, singers and artists even now. Several programmes in the national capital and elsewhere in the country marked the occasion, pointing to the fact that poetry still has something to do with the soul.

We have reached the end of the Golden Jubilee Year of the journal with the present issue, September-October 2007. The Golden Jubilee Translation Competition announced in this connection has been successfully concluded on 29 August, 2007, after a month from the releasing of the advertisements on July 29th. The results have been published in this issue. The next issue is the Golden Jubilee special, which will carry the prize-winning entries.

A.J. Thomas
Editor

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Qurratulain Hyder: An Author Par Excellence

Gopi Chand Narang

If anyone can be called a phenomenon in modern Urdu fiction, it is Qurratulain Hyder, the author of the famous Urdu novel, *Aag ka Darya* (The River of Fire), which, in the late fifties, rocked the literary circles in Pakistan, and consequent upon the publication of which the author had to migrate back to India. Later, this novel was selected by the National Book Trust for their prestigious *Aadaan Pradaan* series for translation into various Indian languages. Though the novel went through many printings in India, but since it was published outside India (1956) and thus could not be taken up for Akademi's award, it was her collection of short stories, *Patjhar ki Awaz* (The Voice of Autumn), first published from New Delhi in 1965, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967. Following this, her novel *Akhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar*, (1973), won for her the Jnanpith Award.

Qurratulain Hyder was born in 1927 in Aligarh, into an enlightened family of writers. Her father Sajjad Haider Yaldram was a highly respected original writer in Urdu, as was her mother Nazr Sajjad Hyder. Qurratulain passed her high school at the age of thirteen, and her M. A. in English from Lucknow University at the age of 19 in 1946. She migrated to Pakistan in 1947 with her parents but returned to India after the publication of her magnum opus, *Aag ka Darya*, as mentioned before, and was given Indian nationality again. For some time she worked for the *Daily Telegraph*, London, and also for the B.B.C., London. She had attended Arts Schools in Lucknow and London and learned a good deal about music and painting, and had a sound knowledge of English literature

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besides being well versed in Urdu and Persian literary traditions. While in Bombay she worked as the editor of *Imprint*, and also served on the editorial staff of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* for many years. She was a member of the Film Censor Board of India, and a distinguished Visiting Professor at the Jamia Millia Islamia and the Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh.

A number of novels, novelettes and short story collections make up Qurratulain Hyder's ouevre. *Aag ka Darya* (The River of Fire), *Mere bhi Sanam-khane* (My Temple Too), *Safina-i-Gham-e-Dil* (The Boat of the Heart's Grief), *Roshni ka Safar* (The Journey of Light) short stories, 1981; *Kar-e-Jahan Daraz Hai* (The Task of the World is Endless Vol. I, 1977, and Vol.11, 1979, a biographical novel) and *Aakhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar* (The Travellers unto the Night's End) 1978, *Roshni ki Raftar* (The Speed of Light) 1982, *Gardish-e-Rang Chaman* and *Chandani Begum* are novels. *Seeta Haran*, *Dilruba*, *Chaee Ke Bagh*, *Agle Janam Mohe Bitya Na Kijo*, are novelettes. *Sitaron se Aage* (Beyond the Stars), *Sheeshay ke Ghar* (Glass Houses) and *Patjhar ki Awaz* (The Voice of Autumn) are collections of short stories. She had written a number of articles in various journals in India and Pakistan. She had been writing fairly extensively in English on literary topics and arts, and had translated some books from Russian into Urdu. She had also translated *Portrait of a Lady* (Henry James) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (T.S. Eliot) into Urdu. With Sardar Jafri, she had edited *Ghalib: Poetry and Letters*, and with Khushwant Singh, *Stories From India*.

Almost all of Qurratulain Hyder's fiction reflects her preoccupation with India's cultural past, the past-ness of the past, as well as its relation with the present. There is a sense of urgency about her work in that what the Indian people now have become is closely linked with what they have been, and a reflection upon their present identity has to take into account the formative processes that have shaped this cultural identity. Qurratulain Hyder is Indian and her ethos oriental but the human nature she probes is to be found anywhere, and the suffering she depicts is universal. Her work is marked by a quality of vastness and magnitude both in time and space, and undoubtedly she has produced some of the unique fiction of our times. Let me briefly dwell on her improtant books that placed her firmly in the world of Urdu fiction.

Aag ka Darya, a novel, spanning Indian history from the 1950s back to the hoary past of Indian civilization, definitely to the times of the Buddha, is a witness to Qurratulain's uncanny vision that gives a unique depth and meaning to Time and Space. In this novel, her perspective is universal and her concern, humanity at large.

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The story is spellbinding and fast-paced. The episodic narrative mode, keeps the attention of the reader always on a high. Gautam, the protagonist, a student in ancient times begins his peregrinations in the forest and eventually reaches the horrid times of Partition. Many a scene she portrays remains vivid in the readers' memory.

Qurratulain pulls off a double effect through writing in Urdu: the implications of the theme, which appeals to genuine humanity and expresses the anguish of any sensitive mind, found avid readers wherever else the language was read and spoken, and yet it remained a thoroughly Indian book. It also deals firmly with the colonial past, especially looking at the advent of the English with the kind of critical sternness, seeking to give a balanced assessment of the Indian ethos down the millennia.

Patjhar ki Awaz (The Voice of Autumn) is an outstanding collection of short and long stories and a novelette, "Housing Society". Handling with remarkable skill an outstanding variety of subjects and themes, and recreating history, Qurratulain Hyder is at her best in this collection. Her sensitivity to mood and situation and her considerable powers of characterization have no parallel in contemporary Urdu fiction. Most of the writings included in this volume are marked by the basic question of the predicament of human beings, the complexity of relations, and the unavoidability of time with a backdrop of the cultural cohesion and the cultural personality of the Indo-Gangetic people.

In "Jila-Watan" (The Exiles), one of her best long stories, while underlining the humanistic aspects of the integrated Hindu-Muslim culture, or composite culture of the great cities of Northern India, she reflects on human suffering through the portrayal of vital experiences of the generation of those times in India and Pakistan, a generation which had passed through a profound historical change and turmoil, caused by Partition, Independence, and exile. In another story, "Dalan Wala" (That Winter) typical of her impressionistic style, she effectively employs past recollections and experiences capturing the dark and bright areas of human nature, and the underlying cultural unity of the Indian people.

"Patjhar ki Awaz," the title story, perhaps the only story of its kind by Qurratulain Hyder, depicts the predicament of a nymphomaniac, who, thirsting for love, in spite of the purity of her soul, passes from one man to another, and yet another by the sheer force of circumstances over which she has no control, and eventually in her grey days, feels like a fallen leaf drifted listlessly by the autumn winds.

Kare-e-Jahan Daraz Hai, the title of the next book, is after a line from Iqbal which means 'The task of the world is endless.' The author

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calls it a biographical novel. It is a breathtaking book because of its scope, diversity of narrative voices, and layers of references. From the first page it snares the reader in its web of history and memory, fact and fiction, and does not let one go till the end. It is the history of a family of Nahtor, Bijnaur, which begins in the 12th century and continues to the present. In the flowering of that particular family, however, there is also revealed to our riveted gaze the formation of that more general cultural identity, the Indian Muslim and his composite patterns of sociological behaviour.

Akhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar (Travellers unto the Night's End), is another outstanding novel by Qurratulain Hyder published from Bombay in 1978. It deals with one of the most fateful periods of the history of the subcontinent, i.e., from the pre-World War II terrorist activity in Bengal and the Quit India Movement to the Partition of the country, and then to the events of 1970 and the eventual emergence of Bangladesh. (The author's main concerns are psychological and existential in that, the once revolutionary characters who, inspired by high ideals, give up their everything for their ideology, but with the change of time, and driven by primitive impulses and desires, stoop to the level of ordinary beings given to greed and lust; and disillusioned, they seek careers of ordinary comforts and base pleasures. Qurratulain Hyder raises some basic questions about the nature of existence and human freedom, how people rise to heights pressed by challenges, but in fact, the dark areas always persist and the scope of choices is rather limited. It is a vibrant story of different families—Hindu, Muslim, Christian and English—interwoven with each other during these three decades of revolutionary fervour. The changes wrought by the impact of these eventual years on the mentalities, aims, moral values, ideals, and outlook of the characters are depicted with profound psychological insight, and the characters of the hero Raihan, the heroine Deepali, and the younger Yasmeen are hauntingly drawn. The atmosphere of East Bengal, now Bangladesh, its cities, rivers and jungles is also caught very vividly.

Qurratulain Hyder has an intense feeling for the immensity of pain, and for that cruel force called Time which overshadows all activity on earth. Time, in her fiction, is that faceless force that transforms all faces, which is linear as well as spiral, which one can ignore only at one's own peril, and which is so easily accessible, and is still so boundless as the universe itself. She urges us to recognize that the inevitability of change is the only reality, and that fact has one face of hope as well as another of sorrow. A linearly progressing Time brings changes, and change can

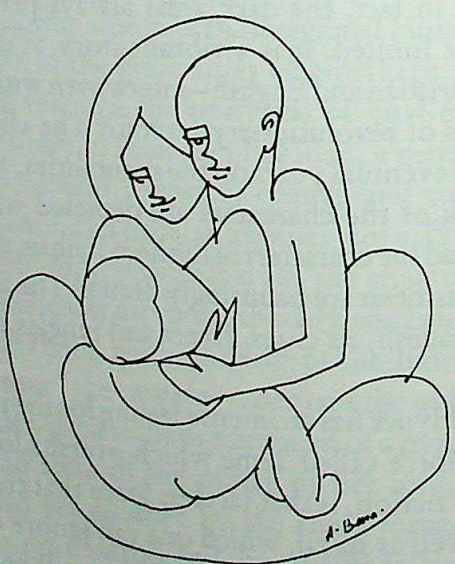
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be a harbinger of grief or joy. Should one then take sides? That would be too easy, she confides to us, too simplistic, for these issues cannot be settled by referring to the material world alone. What counts for Qurratulain Hyder is the human spirit and the relationships through which it blossoms forth. And that is where the linearity of Time turns into a spiral, bringing recognizable moments back to us if we have the necessary sensibility.

Many were the awards that came after Qurratulain Hyder besides the Sahitya Akademi Award and Jnanpith Award, of which two important ones are the Ghalib Award and Soviet Land Nehru Awards. She also was honoured with Padma Sri, Padma Bhushan, and the highest literary honour of the land, the Fellowship of Sahitya Akademi.

As Qurratulain Hyder passes away, a phenomenal presence fades away from the scene of Urdu fiction. But her works form her real presence, rather than her flesh and blood, corporeal figure. As long as Indian literature prevails, Qurratulain Hyder will live on.

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Qurratulain Hyder: A Tribute

Syed Khalid Qadri

Both in Europe and in the Indian subcontinent, the fictional form of story-telling came via Central Asia and the Middle East. One can hardly think of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* without thinking of *Alif Laila*. Besides these brilliant and exotic tales, largely born of the fantastic and the supernatural, there existed a rich tradition of the grand and the heroic too, in the form of the legends of Hatim Tai, Sindbad and Rustum. The earliest form of fictional narratives—'Dastan' in Urdu, therefore, is likely to be traced back to the existence of such storehouses of the same in Arabic and Persian.

After dabbling for a while with the motto of social reform (the didactic novels of Nazir Ahmed and others) and the 'picaresque' (works like *Fasanae Aazad* emulating *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews* in English), along with a brief stint with romantic fantasies, we see the emergence of what may be called the secular form of fiction in Urdu. It both grew and culminated, in the creative genius of Premchand and his contemporaries, coinciding interestingly with the tumultuous years of India's struggle for Independence. The first notable group of such fiction writers, led by Premchand, took their clues both from the East and the West.

With Mirza Haadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan* and Premchand's *Kafan* and *Godan* (each being the finest specimen of its respective genre), the short story and the novel in Urdu seem to have arrived. However, from among those who nourished it greatly, not only by extending its thematic frontiers and experimenting freely with its craft and technique, but also imparting to it an intellectual and philosophical density, the name of Qurratulain Hyder stands out most prominently. She, as a writer of socio-secular fiction, casts a huge shadow over the landscape of the modern short story and novel in Urdu. In her demise, Urdu fiction has lost one of its most dazzling gems.

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Born in a family of considerable literary repute (her father Sajjad Hyder Yeldram and mother Nazr Sajjad Hyder were both notable names of early Urdu fiction), Qurratulain penned her first story at the age of eleven. Her very first collection of short stories *Sitaron Se Aage* signalled the arrival of a blazing star in the firmament of Urdu fiction. Ever since, she hardly looked back, proceeding uninhibitedly on her literary mission, producing numerous fictional works, short and long, enthralling both the readers and the critics alike.

Over the years, she produced a formidable array of short stories, novels, novelettes and travelogues. The following may be considered as the landmarks of her illustrious career: *Sitaron Se Aage*, *Mere Bhi Sanam Khane*, *Housing Society*, *Sheeshe Ke Ghar*, *Patjhar Ki Aawaz*, *Hamin Chiragh Hamin Parwane*, *Sita Haran*, *Dilruba*, *Chai Ke Bagh*, *Aag ka Darya*, *Safina-e-Gam-e-Dil*, *Gardishe Range Chaman*, *Kar-e-Jahan Daraz Hai*, *Akhir-e-Shab Ke Hamsafar*, *Roshni Ki Raftar* and *Chandni Begum*.

Qurratulain, called 'Nilofer' as a young girl, spent her early days with her parents in Aligarh and Port Blair. After finishing her schooling from a public school in Dehra Dun, she joined Isabella Thoburn College of Lucknow and later Lucknow University, from where she did her post graduation in English Literature. She also did a short course in arts and painting from the College of Fine Arts in Lucknow and received training in classical music for sometime from Ustad Bade Agha Saheb. She went away briefly to Pakistan and worked for the Ministry of Information and Culture there, visiting various places of cultural significance, including Dhaka, then the capital of East-Pakistan. Disillusioned, she returned to India in 1961. For short durations she had also been associated with B.B.C., *Imprint* and *The Illustrated Weekly* of India.

Qurratulain Hyder was a prolific writer with a panoramic canvas, encompassing eras and civilizations and peoples and cultures pertaining to the past and the present. With great mastery and an ever persuasive humanity of a benevolent artist, she would weave into one seamless whole, plots and narratives of diverse historical periods and cultural eras, portraying people of multiple identities. *Aag ka Darya*, for example, is one such magnum opus. Taking off from the Mauryan or symbolically speaking, the Buddhist India, the narrative sweeps across centuries to culminate in the tumultuous times of India's Partition. This mega narrative, or if one could also call it a modern epic in prose, cuts across generations presenting through large and vivid slides, the political, social and cultural life of a cross section of people living at various points of time in the subcontinent. On the part of the author, this is a giant effort to portray and project, through her unified vision of history, events and people, as part of the great flux of time.

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Time and change, birth and death, decay and regeneration, are the recurring themes of most of her works, with man at the centre stage, holding his own. In one of her reminiscent moods, she would flirt with history, celebrating the great romance of life; in yet another moment of nostalgia, with a streak of melancholy, she would brood over the passing out of what was once part of a grand and fine culture. Elaborating on her art, Fateh Mohd Malik, a notable writer and critic of Urdu, has rightly remarked that, "Qurratulain Hyder taught our fiction to think profoundly." It was not just story-telling, it was fiction made knowledge-filled, not only satisfying aesthetically but also stimulating intellectually. This could be so, for, she brought to her art the vast knowledge and experience she had acquired over the years; and she also knew how to assimilate and utilize it.

The plots of her novels and also some of the stories are in the mode of reminiscences, autobiographical glimpses or a family saga; but she had both the vision and the craft, to extend and elevate, and finally to transcend it to the universal and the philosophical. The scope of her creativity and the range of her narrative excellence, are wide and vast like those of the great masters of European fiction, Thackeray, Turgenev, Balzac and Flaubert, although she would display it only in flashes. To find fault with her for dabbling a little too often with history or for being over indulgent and parochial when setting off the family saga, would amount to a depreciation of her literary stature. Although, for her romantic perception of the feudal and the aristocratic culture of Oudh (of which she herself was a part), she was heckled and nicknamed "Pompom Darling" by progressives like Ismat Chugtai, she stuck to her guns and continued to write about people and their lives as she knew it. To take an unbiased view, she made commendable efforts to reach out to history, authenticating it, by making her works a permanent witness to it for posterity. These culture-centric murals, if one could call them so, painted with big strokes and in vivid colours, give a new identity to the form of the novel in Urdu.

The simplistic assumption on the part of a few Urdu critics that she tried to experiment with the 'stream of consciousness' technique in her novels, was curtly denied by her on several occasions. She, however, acknowledged that she made certain innovations pertaining to the narrative technique, such as breaking the sequence of time or dealing with it in cyclic, rather than linear, mode; but these are indigenous attempts and have been brought in as per her own creative requirements. It may be apt here to quote one of her statements in this regard:

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> Writing is a metaphysical act. It comes like rain pouring on paper. Intuition, derivation analyses, representation or transmitting information, all these are part of it. An ordinary event, a branch full of flowers, a lonely child standing in a lane, a bus with its lights flickering, passing through a deserted highway, gusts of the Autumnal wind, notes of music sneaking out from somewhere far off, the golden texture of the bedroom décor in a quiet afternoon, and you proceed on a new voyage; and no one can assess or analyze the entire world, the whole universe; but the quest may surely begin from a certain point. (Translation from– 'Dastane Ahde Gul' p101-102)

What is often referred to as her 'romantic nostalgia', to my mind, is Qurratulain Hyder's great and unending search for the 'lost time'. It is, I think, at the centre of her creative endeavours and forms the core of her creativity. It is, also for her, a catalyst as well and an essential component of her all-encompassing vision.

Sometime during the 1980s, I had the opportunity of meeting her twice—at the residence of Jeelani Bano (a renowned fiction writer of Urdu), and at one of her relatives' place in Hyderabad. Basically an introvert and a little too self-conscious, she would not forget to pull out, at short intervals, a small mirror from her vanity bag to gaze at herself and to ensure that her make-up was in place. Otherwise chirpy, she did not relish any discussion focusing on her art. About her literary accomplishments, she had sounded quite casual, letting others talk and elaborate.

Despite having met her, not once but twice, in flesh and blood and seen her from a close range, I remember her, quite strangely, as an elderly but attractive woman in a classical mould, seen in a picture frame in one of those art galleries.

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Honour

Qurratulain Hyder

The bathroom was like the Forty Thieves' Cave: dark, damp, cool and full of massive, gleaming things like hamams, engraved washbasins, tall brass jugs with slender spouts. The clotheshorses looked like mysterious brigands. Shamshad Begum had to make her way through all this before she could get to the window. She had scrapped a little paint off one of the panes so that she could peep at her rakish, handsome fiancé flitting in and out of the outer courtyard.

The window overlooked the adjoining house. Its walled front garden was lined with jasmine and pomegranates and had a fountain in the middle. That was the domain of Aziz Khan, the cousin to whom Shamshad Begum had been engaged to marry. Once in a while, Aziz Khan sauntered down to the main entrance of the zenana and shouted—in a special tone of voice meant only for her: "I say, will someone send us more tea and hot pakoras." That was enough. Shamshad ran hotfoot to the kitchen across the spacious zenana courtyard. Aziz Khan would return to his cronies and his pigeons and his paper kites. He was an only son and had been thoroughly pampered by his parents. And Shamshad adored him.

They led a peaceful life in Shahjahanpur. Their ancestors, like the other Rohilla Pathans, had come, many centuries ago, from Afghanistan. An entire region in western United Provinces was known after them as Rohilkhand.

Shamshad Begum lived in a traditional joint family. Both her father and his cousin were landowners.

The Pathans of Rohilkhand were proud of their Afghan ancestry. They had retained their pink-and-white complexions, robustness and good looks. Shamshad Begum was also tall and pretty. She lived in strict purdah,

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had never been to school and had been taught Urdu, Arabic and Persian at home. She, too, was an only child.

The date of marriage had been fixed when disaster struck. Cholera broke out in Shahjahanpur. Within a few days, both her parents were dead. Shamshad was stunned. She was consoled by her future parents-in-law. The wedding was postponed. After a while she resumed peeping out of the green window.

One night Aziz's father had a heart attack. He died within a few hours. Shamshad began to believe that she was an *abhagin* (bringer of misfortune). After some days, Aziz told his mother that he must attend to some court cases in Allahabad. They were affluent landowners forever involved in litigation which had been a favourite pastime of both her father and her uncle.

Aziz went away to Allahabad. In the autumn afternoon, the wind rustled in the empty, walled garden. Everybody had suddenly vanished: Father, Uncle, Aziz. A year went by and Aziz did not come back. Shamshad took to hiding in the dark bathroom where she buried her face in soft muslin dopattas, stacked on a clotheshorse, and cried.

It was uncanny, the aunt followed her husband. She died of pneumonia. But Shamshad knew that, more than pneumonia, it was a broken heart.

After her father's death, Shamshad Begum had become heir to a vast fortune with Aziz as her legal guardian. Where was he? Lucknow... Calcutta... Mussoorie... Nainital? The rumours said he was busy squandering the money that had come to him after his father's death.

Shamshad Begum was a minor. In the absence of Aziz, her other relatives cheated her of her inheritance. The years went by with amazing speed. She was 30. And still waiting for Aziz Khan. She had been an arrogant young girl. Age and misfortune had mellowed her. But she remained inordinately proud of her family. As a noble Rohilla maiden, she would remain true to the pledge her Abba had given to his cousin. She was the only remaining custodian of the family honour.

Shamshad's hair turned grey. She fortified herself in the mansion and stopped meeting people. Every Friday she went to the men's quarters and had the place swept, the rooms aired and the Victorian furniture dusted. She tended the trees and flowering shrubs in the courtyard and cleaned the fountain clogged with yellow leaves. He might turn up any time. You never know.

In the heavy silence of long summer afternoons, she lay on a divan in the arched verandah, dozing or staring at the tamarind which towered above the zenana courtyard. Salamat, the old cook, sat on a cot under

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the tree, chewing tobacco. Often, she muttered to herself: "The Good Lord laughs only twice: once when He bestows honours on someone whom another wants to undo; and a second time when He decides to destroy someone trying to improve his lot."

"Stop it, Salamat Bua," Shamshad Begum would say. But the old woman was deaf and cussed and continued to mutter her ominous forebodings.

It was a cold and misty winter morning. Shamshad Begum had just finished taking her bath when Salamat's idiot daughter knocked on the door.

"Apa...Apa...Come out...Hurry up..." she shouted, jumping up and down.

"What is it, idiot?" Shamshad Begum asked from inside as she wrapped a towel round her hair.

"Apa...For God's sake. The Master has come. He wants you to send him tea and hot pakoras."

Shamshad Begum could not quite believe her ears. In the semi-darkness of the bathroom, she frantically groped her way to the window, stood on tiptoe and peeped out. The courtyard had come to life. Servants bustled around. Suit-cases and holdalls were being carried. Somebody haggled with the driver of the horse carriage drawn outside the entrance. And then her eyes fell on a woman! A dark, sour-faced slut in a red georgette sari. The next moment he came in.....handsomer than ever. He went up to the woman and said something. They laughed....

Ali Baba's Cave turned into a deep dark well into which Shamshad Begum fell headlong, feeling dizzy and suffocated like in a nightmare. She swayed and fell, then passed out in a swoon.

Late in the evening, Aziz brought his wife inside. A little self-consiously, he came near the main door, cleared his throat and said: "I say, Chhammi, come here. Meet your new relative."

Shamshad Begum stood in the inner verandah. She trembled, felt dizzy again and shot back into the bathroom. She bolted the door from inside. In the verandah the couple stood about awkwardly for some minutes, then went back to their house.

Shamshad Begum had come to know about the woman. She was shocked—not so much because Aziz had betrayed her and married someone else as because he had married a whore and brought disgrace to the family honour.

Aziz's wife tried to meet her again. She was formerly known as "Miss Kallo Bai of Lucknow, Gramophone & Radio Singer." She desperately wanted to be accepted as the daughter-in-law of the family.

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But Shamshad Begum had ordered the doorman, Dhammu Khan: "If you are a real Pathan, break the legs of anyone—man or woman—who dares to enter my house!"

She began to wear white like a widow and let her relatives cheat her out of her remaining property. Aziz sensed the situation. He was stricken with guilt. He resolved to fight court cases on her behalf and sent her a large sum of money through an aunt. Shamshad Begum was livid. She strode down to the gatehouse, from where her voice could be heard in the men's quarters, and declaimed: "Dhammu Khan, let it be known that I, daughter to Jumma Khan and niece of Shabbu Khan, would prefer to starve rather than accept any money touched by the inmates of brothels...."

She had to sell her jewellery in order to run the large house and support hordes of retainers and good-for-nothing relatives. When the ornaments were gone, she opened a little school for the girls of the neighbourhood and took in sewing. The hangers-on left her. Only the two old faithfuls remained—Dhammu Khan and Salamat Bua.

Shamshad Begum fell ill. The fever rose and she became delirious. Salamat panicked and sent for Aziz who called the family doctor. Husband and wife sat by her bedside and nursed her. When she opened her eyes, she saw the couple hovering over her. She gave Kallo Bai a withering look and closed her eyes again. Kallo was terrified of her husband's strange and imperious cousin. Quietly she slipped back to her house.

Shamshad Begum recovered.

It was the summer of 1947. There were Hindu-Muslim riots and talks of abolishing the zamindar system. Aziz, who had already run through most of his inheritance, went to Delhi to see a lawyer. There, one day in September, he was killed in a riot.

The day the news of his death came, Shamshad Begum was fast asleep on her ottoman in the verandah. It was late afternoon. Kallo came running to the gatehouse and banged on the closed door. "Open the door!" she screamed hysterically. "Please open the door! A terrible thing has happened! We are ruined!"

Shamshad Begum woke up with a start. The courtyard was desolate as ever. The leaves of the tamarind rustled in the breeze. The scream pierced through her sleepy haze and hit her again. She got up and looked around. Kallo was pounding the door with her fists. Shamshad Begum took the key off a hook in the wall and ambled down to the entrance. Grumbling to herself, she opened the door.

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There stood Kallo, her long hair spread over her shoulders. She looked terrible, like a black witch. Her face was contorted, she had injured her wrists trying to break her glass bangles against the door. For a few seconds she stared at her husband's haughty cousin. Then she lurched forward and tried to embrace her. Shamshad Begum stepped back. Kallo broke into a long and loud wail: "Apa...I have lost my kingdom... My crown has fallen into the dust... I have become a widow...He is dead!"

Shamshad Begum was still drugged with sleep. She rubbed her eyes and looked at the frenzied woman. Slowly, the truth dawned on her. Then she sat down on the threshold and covered her face with her white muslin dopatta. Her sobs mingled with Kallo's hysterical jabbering.

"Apa, I have become a widow...." Kallo screamed again.

Shamshad Begum wiped her tears and pulled herself together. She stood up, erect and imperious as ever. She said firmly: "Wretch! You have become a widow today, I have always been a widow. Go away, go back to where you belong!"

She slammed the door, bolted it from the inside and returned to her divan.

After a few days, Kallo disappeared—along with Aziz's costly belongings. Through the bathroom window Shamshad Begum watched the woman pack up and leave with cartloads of expensive stuff—carpets and paintings and silver and crockery. Shamshad Begum did not feel anything. She merely watched, stony-eyed, another scene of the passing show....

The Government Custodian put a seal on the adjoining house. Shamshad Begum was unable to prove that Aziz Khan had been killed in the riots and had not migrated to Pakistan. The house was declared evacuee property. Shamshad Begum could not care less.

After a few weeks, a Sikh refugee doctor from Lahore and his family took up residence in Aziz's house. The Sardarni became friendly with Shamshad Begum. Dhammu Khan died after a long illness." Salamat had become a cripple. Most of Shamshad Begum's relatives and servant left for Pakistan.

The refugee doctor's daughter was married to a minor official in New Delhi. When the girl came to Shahjahanpur to visit her parents, she met Shamshad Begum. The girl told her parents that her husband's Muslim boss was looking for a needy lady from a good family to teach Urdu to his children. The doctor's wife persuaded Shamshad Begum to accept the position. "Bhenji, how long can you live like this, all by yourself, with no income? Swallow your pride. There is no harm in working for one's living."

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Shamshad Begum agreed. It suddenly occured to her that when she grew old and died, there must be someone by her bedside to read the Quran and perform the last rites.

Shamshad Begum packed a few clothes, put on her burqa and stepped out of the threshold of her forefather's haveli which had now been reduced to a magnificent ruin. Zamindar Jumma Khan's daughter had become a genteel, impoverished teacher going out into a strange, unknown world.

Shamshad Begum spent twelve long years in New Delhi with the Sabihuddins. They were good to her and treated her as one of the family members. But their children grew up and Mr Sabihuddin retired and decided to go back to his home-town. They passed Shamshad Begum on to the Rashid Alis, with whom she spent five years as housekeeper. The Rashid Alis also treated her well and called her "Aunt Shamshad."

Mr Rashid Ali was transferred to the Indian Embassy in Washington and did not know what to do with the aunt. Was she to be left alone once again?

One day Mrs Rashid Ali went to Roshanara Club to attend a farewell lunch. After that she went off to visit some relatives in old Delhi.

Shamshad Begum arrived at the Club and waited on the lawn. She always wore a white sari and looked like an upper-class nanny. As she walked up and down waiting for her mistress, she saw a stylish lady staring at her from under a garden umbrella. She was playing cards with some equally stylish men. She was very beautiful and sophisticated like a model in a fashion magazine. Shamshad Begum had lived for seventeen years in New Delhi and had got accustomed to modern affluent women. She noticed the lady looking at her again. Soon, a bearer came to her and said that the Mem Saheb wanted to speak to her.

Shamshad Begum went over to the bridge table. The lady smiled and said that she was looking for a respectable but needy woman who could stay with her in Bombay as a sort of housekeeper. She had too many servants and really there was no work to do. She just wanted a motherly old woman around. Did she know anybody?

Shamshad Begum whispered her thanks to the merciful God who closed one door but always opened another. She told the lady that she was about to be relieved of her present job and would she please speak to her mistress.

Mrs Rashid Ali came. The lady introduced herself as Razia Bano from Bombay and asked her about Shamshad Begum. Razia Bano was flying to Bombay the next morning. Shamshad Begum could follow by train whenever it was convenient. Mrs Rashid Ali looked relieved. But

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she asked Shamshad Begum anxiously, "Auntie, can you travel all alone to Bombay?"

Shamshad Begum nodded. There was no longer any need in life to say "No" to anything. She did not even negotiate for her salary. She had settled for herself forty rupees with food and did not need more. She did not mind wearing cast-off clothes. Long ago she had realised that fancy clothes, ornaments, property, money, relationships, love and affection were all meaningless, shadowy and transitory. Only Allah's Name was eternal, everlasting.

From her huge bag, Razia Bano fished out one hundred and fifty rupees, along with her address. "Your fare to Bombay and other expenses," she said casually. Mrs Rashid Ali was amazed. Shamshad Begum remained nonchalant. She knew that Bombay was the city of tycoons. Life had ceased to surprise her anyway.

But at Bombay Central, Shamshad Begum got a little unnerved. The crowds scared her. She came out, clutching at her little casket of betel-leaves and got into a taxi.

The taxi stopped at a gleaming block of flats on Warden Road. Shamshad Begum stepped out. A Gurkha watchman sat stoically on his stool. She went into the foyer and was baffled by the automatic lift. "Son," she called timidly, "how does this thing work?" A liftman materialised and took her up to the eleventh floor. He carried her luggage up to a double-leaved door and left. She rang the bell. An eye peeped from the other side. Then the door opened. Another Gurkha came out and eyed her with suspicion. She became nervous again. She reminded herself that she was a brave Pathan. With great dignity she said: "Please, tell the Begum Saheba that Shamshad Begum has arrived from Delhi."

"I know. Come in," he said curtly and opened the door. He picked up her little trunk and bedroll. She followed him, still clutching at her pandan and fan. They crossed a large drawing-room which had a bar at one end and a little cinema screen on a wall. Then they entered a gallery which had closed doors on either side. The Gurkha led her to a small, bare servant's room and dumped the luggage on the floor.

"Is the Begum Saheba in?" Shamshad asked politely.

"Yes. Sleeping."

"And Saheb?"

The Gurkha did not answer and strode away.

The room was bare and stuffy. There was a small wooden bed with no mattress. "It will give me a backache," she thought simply, and opened the window.

She was confronted by a shimmering, blue-green sea. She had never

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seen the sea before. It was a fascinating sight. Then, suddenly, it occurred to her that Mecca and Medina were somewhere there across these shining waters. "God, in His great goodness and mercy, has brought me all the way to Bombay. Some day soon he will take me on the Haj pilgrimage as well." The thought brought tears to her eyes. She moved away from the window.

The flat was eerily quiet. She decided that the Saheb must be in his office, the children away at school. "Let me see if the Begum has got up from her siesta." She walked down to the end of the corridor and saw a half-open door. She knocked on it.

"Come in."

She entered a luxurious air-conditioned bedroom. Razia Bano lolled on a four-poster. She wore a fluffy peignoir and was smoking a cigarette. A white telephone and a golden notebook lay beside her on the silken eiderdown.

"So you have come, Bua. Sit down, sit down," she indicated the floor.

Shamshad Begum was taken aback. She had never been called a "Bua". Only servant maids were called that. She had never sat on the floor. She pursed her lips and sat down on the edge of the sob. She wanted tea. She did not approve of her new mistress's revealing dress and her smoking. But then she thought to herself. Every place has its own customs. Such must be the custom of Bombay."

Razia Bano eyed her with amusement and said: "Bua, I am glad you have come. I did want someone like you—innocent and God-fearing. I can judge people, you know. I had guessed at once that you were a decent old woman. Now look, I must tell you a few things. You do not have to do any work. Just stay in your room and pray. I always want some elderly lady to stay in the house and recite the Holy Book every morning and pray for my well-being. I had a pious old Hyderabadi lady who lived here. The poor thing died last year.

"We have two Goan ayahs to look after our wardrobes, etc. You may, once in a while, supervise the kitchen or prepare a special Mughlai dish or two."

A smartly dressed young girl with a cigarette in her mouth entered the room. Razia Bano said something to her in English. She giggled and went out

"Your daughter? Masha Allah, how many children do you have?" Shamshad Begum asked with sudden interest.

"My niece. I have no children."

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"And your Saheb? Does he do business?" She had heard that everybody in Bombay did business.

"My husband is dead." Razia Bano replied curtly. Then went on: "So I was telling you...Do not listen to gossip. Do not fraternise with the servants. Bombay is a terrible place. And these are evil times. All sorts of things happen here. Don't get shocked. Also, my nieces are modern girls. A lot of friends come to see them. You understand?"

She did not but nodded vaguely. Mr Sabihuddin's children also had a lot of school friends. She badly wanted tea.

"I run a large business," Razia Bano continued. "Import-export. Various kinds of people come to see me about. And being an enterprising woman. I also have many enemies. That is why I have had a steel door fixed outside. The police have raided us twice."

"The police?" Shamshad Begum repealed with alarm.

Razia Bano laughed. "Don't worry! The police often bother big business people like us. That's why, when someone rings the bell, be very careful..."

Shamshad Begum yawned again.

"I will tell the bearer to give you some tea."

"Thank you," Shamshad Begum said, getting up, and returned to her room.

She said her afternoon and evening prayers and felt very bored. There was nothing to do. The flat was silent again. She stirred out of the room when the front bell rang. She forgot the instructions of her mistress and rushed to the drawing room. Quickly she opened the door. Two men entered. One wore a silken kurta and snow-white dhoti. There was a flash of diamonds on his fingers. He was very fat. The other was dressed like a film star. He was sleek and oily. Both flopped on a sofa and spread their legs.

"Bai....Where is Madam?" the Seth asked.

Shamshad Begum was horrified. What kind of language was this? Primly, she said: "Begum Saheba must be in her room. May I know your august names?"

"Forget our names! Call the chicks':"

"*Sala chhokri log kidher hai?*" the oily one asked.

"*Hamare ko ye time bola.*"

Shamshad Begum couldn't quite understand what they were saying but their Urdu was certainly atrocious and she was about to tell them to mind their language and manners when Razia Bano came rushing in. She looked at Shamshad Begum and said: "Oh, Bua, please go to your room and rest. Will you?"

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"Yes, I will, thank you," Shamshad Begum said simply and trotted back to the corridor.

The woman is senile, Razia Bano thought irritably and turned to greet the visitors.

Back in the little room, Shamshad Begum unrolled her prayer rug and sat down to pray once again. She thanked the Good Lord who only laughs twice and Who, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, had given her shelter once again in a decent household and provided her with an honest livelihood.

Translated from Urdu by the Author

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C V Sreeraman

Note

C V Sreeraman, noted Malayalam short-story writer who died on 10 October, 2007, was born on 7 February, 1933 at Porkkulam near Kunnamkulam in the Thrissur district of Kerala. He had had his early education in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) where his father was a high-ranking official with the Railways. Years later he took a degree in law from the Law College, Chennai. He had worked in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as the officer-in-charge of rehabilitating the East Bengal refugees. Upon his return from the Andamans, C V Sreeraman took to practicing law at Kunnamkulam.

C V Sreeraman had been active in Left politics right from his school days. Later in life, he served as president of Porkkulam Grama Panchayat for sixteen years and Chovvannur Block Panchayat for five years. He was the member of the General Council of Sahitya Akademi from 1998 to 2003. It is said that Sreeraman started writing short stories when he was already well into the prime age of 42, at the behest of the well-known Malayalam filmmaker and cartoonist, G Aravindan. The rich and varied experience he had gained in the Andamans, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu were to form the bedrock of his unique short fiction saturated with irony, humour and, of course, an inimitable lyrical charm. It has been observed that 'displacement and isolation are the dominant themes in Sreeraman's oeuvre.' He has published more than fifteen collections of short stories of which *Vasthuhaara*, *Chidambaram*, *Dukkitharude Dukham*, *Chakshusravanagalasthamam* etc. deserve special mention. Some of Sreeraman's well-known stories such as "Kshurasyadhara" (The Razor's Edge) and "Ini Rishikeshilekkilla" (Never to Rishikesh Again) are laced with many memorable quotes from Sanskrit texts especially the Vedas, the *Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Obviously, it was to expose the insincerity and hypocrisy of those who swear by them every now and then that he had used them, with dexterity, in his stories.

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Sreeraman was honoured with the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best short-story writer for his maiden work *Vasthuhaara* in 1983. An anthology of short stories titled *Sreeramante Kathakal* won him the Sahitya Akademi award in 1999. Five of his stories namely "Chidambaram," "Vasthuhara," "Irikkappindam," "Ponthanmada" and "Sheemathamburan" were made into films that won State as well as National awards. The film *Ponthanmada* by T V Chandran was based on his last two stories mentioned above. The story "Irikkappindam" was made into the film *Purushartham* (by K R Mohanan). The other films *Chidambaram* and *Vasthuhaara* were directed by G Aravindan. *Chidambaram* was awarded the President's Golden Lotus, while *Vasthuhaara* won many awards at the State level. *Purushartham* won the Film Critics' Award for the best story and film. C.V. Sreeraman's stories have appeared in translation in English, German, and many Indian languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi and Oriya. Sreeraman leaves behind his wife, Yasodha, and three children. At the time of his death, C. V. Sreeraman was the Vice-President of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi.

—The Translator

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The Sick

C V Sreeraman

The rain tarried, raging and snarling; gradually it changed its manner and, at last, it was gone, along with the wind. Soman was afraid of facing the first rains of the year. He stood huddled on the elevation of a roadside shop. The wind, which had shooed away the rain, now came back and turned quarrelsome without any reason....

Soman stepped out and walked on. Some vehicle, like an old man covered in a wet woollen cloth and walking with the help of a stick, went past him.

Soman walked past the iron bridge. Suddenly he remembered: It was the paper packet he had in his hand that he had held up against the drizzle. He withdrew his hand quickly. Soman stroked the paper packet. It was not too wet. The paper was a little bit sodden. That's all.

Would Soman have dared to set out on this journey, had the paper packet been not in his hand? He was not this hopeful even after he had received the letter from Meenu. He suddenly remembered the face of the man waiting outside for the receipt for the license fee he had just remitted. He was neither alarmed nor apprehensive...his mind had overcome them all...

What Meenu wanted was just a strong, blue-dyed piece of cloth for a blouse. But when he entered the cloth shop, the dash of colours and the smell of new cloth drew him closer to Meenu. The naked nape of Meenu and her shoulders waxed in his mind. He bought four pieces of cloth in different colours and went out of the shop with a smile on his lips. The headiness Meenu will feel once she takes out each one of them, checking them, sitting on her bed....

She might even try on the blouse pieces by draping them, one after another, over her bosom. A smile will then bloom on her lips, cheeks and eyes....

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The road and the surrounding areas were almost deserted. Nonetheless, while entering the arrack shop, Soman made it a point to look around. It is not long since Soman started frequenting arrack shops. However, he had come to the same arrack shop on a number of occasions previously!

The man at the shop was whiling away his time, reading an evening paper. He took the paper and got into the adjoining room. He opened the arrack bottle by using the newspaper's edge as a grip around the cork. After pouring the liquor into a glass, opened the soda and placed both on the desk. As he started drinking, Soman remembered the same thing again. The day on which he first walked into this place—after Meenu had shifted residence to this locality. Meenu had given him directions:

The arrack shop...and the road in front of it leading towards the west...walking past the first, second, and third public water taps, a fencing of bamboo with a latticed gate could be spotted. The gate is fastened with an iron chain and a padlock. Her description was picturesque. But still, it was into this booze joint that Soman first went that day...It was here that he invoked darkness to envelop him... It was here, again, that he got rid of his faint-heartedness and stored up some courage. However, walking past each water tap, the consternation kept increasing. Soman stood numbed at the latticed gate. At last...where did he reach? The small room exuding the warmth of Menu's breath. The scent of the Himalayan Bouquet talcum powder and the sandal paste. It was with an enlivening bosom hug that Meenu extinguished his anxiety that day.

The same thing, without any let up in the original rhythmic pattern, repeated on countless nights!

He looked at his watch. Did the wind and the rain, which were raging a short while ago, hold up time?

Soman waited for the kick he would soon be feeling in his forehead. To start with the kick in the forehead was simultaneous with the first gulp down the throat.

The shop owner looked hard at Soman:

"Sir, you can have a little more."

"Should I?"

"Certainly, you are young, sir, aren't you? You are in the pink of health."

When Soman heard that this shop owner had never drunk liquor in his life, it was hard for him to believe. As they grew closer, another ability of that man surprised Soman. He was certain of the amount

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of liquor each regular customer could take at one time. Soman drank again.

The solitude in the liquor shop began to put him trial. It was just then that someone came in there and made his mind, already in the dock, stand down for the time being. The man who had just entered was carrying with him the wondrous touches of time, stretching over different periods in his life. The face, mounted on his body — the only living part left of him — was long dead. It was the clothes he wore which looked more empty of life than his face. His pants might have been brown in the beginning. It was an old pair of Tudor Gabardine. The collar of his shirt was suggestive of a grave in which age-old costumes had been buried. Because, a raw, stiff collar was peering out of it like an ancient piece of bone. As though he were in state, led by memories, that man sat on the bench wiping it clean with a handkerchief and then pulling up the trousers so that they could be free of wrinkles.

The man at the liquor shop slightly heightened the pitch of his voice while reading the paper. It did not annoy the visitor in any way. He sat like an honoured guest in a grand assembly of great men. It was the shop owner who had to admit defeat. He went to the visitor.

"It was I who woke you up from the front steps this morning. Don't you remember?"

Still, that man was sitting, blinking in disbelief.

"Do you remember what you said before leaving?"

No answer. He seemed disinclined to give one.

"You had agreed to stop this for some time, hadn't you?"

No reply. He just looked around. His eyes were colder than they ever were.

The man at the shop had to admit defeat once again. It was through action that he admitted defeat now. He went in and poured arrack in a glass and brought it and placed it before him. He opened a soda, too.

"You shouldn't stay around, not even a second, after drinking it."

It was a strong command.

He drank slowly, enjoying the taste. When he had finished the drink, his two pleading eyes looked expectantly at the shop-owner. When the man saw that he was not paying attention, he sat looking at the empty glass covering his face with fingers crossed.

That man had rolled down the long sleeves of his shirt. The cuff link on one hand was clove-shaped and gold-plated while the other cuff was fastened with a rusting safety pin. He waited patiently. Then, as it must have appeared meaningless to wait anymore, he rose and walked

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out. The nails on his worn out shoes produced a strange sound as they grated against the ground. He stooped so as to avoid hitting against the sloping rafters.

"I didn't really like talking to him that way. But how could I help it?"

Why was there a faint sense of guilt in the voice of the shop owner?

"Who was that man? His face appeared to be familiar."

"He seldom comes out. Perhaps, you may have seen him here...that too is unlikely. It was only recently that he started visiting here."

"You haven't yet told me who he is."

"I too know about him only this much. That man shuts himself up in one of the rooms and sits up the whole day, staring. When it gets dark, sometimes, he turns up here. It's said that he had been a high-ranking official."

"Where?"

"Abroad. In the Foreign Service of the Government of India."

"What happened then?"

"What happened! A woman is said to have enticed him into her net, through some magic potion applied in his drink. What would it be like if someone lands in a woman's trap? Finally, they began to play about with government money. Finally, he was flunked out of his job. He went to jail too."

He stopped, giving Soman time to come out with some comment. When it became clear that Soman didn't have anything to say, he continued:

"Do you know what his condition is like today? He loses count of how much he drinks. Once drunk, he is out of his mind."

Soman took the packet of blouse pieces and put it on his lap. He abruptly withdrew his hands that were stroking the paper packet, picked up the glass of liquor and drank. His ears began to shut. Someone's voice fell in his failing ears:

"Where else will you land up but in a jail, if you buy blouse pieces for some slut, using the money filched by issuing fake receipts to someone who remitted the licence fee, and without making an entry in the Cash Book?"

Soman turned his face away and kept looking outside. The endlessly stretching paddy fields seemed to be meeting with the cellars of darkness somewhere. In the paddy fields, burning torches made of the dry fronds of coconut palms started appearing here and there. Into the mind of Soman, too, darkness descended. With it came a leaden heaviness. Thick and pitch-black shadows began to creep into his mind.

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With them came the recurring thoughts always out to get him. Is Meenu related to me in any way? Just about then, Soman heard the loud voice of the arrack-man. He was scolding someone at the top of his voce.

"Hey you, why don't you buy a meal with the money you earn, begging...Should you come here to buy this poison?"

Soman lifted his head to have a look. There was a leper in the courtyard. He was standing with an empty glass in one hand and some money in the other. Indifferent. The immobile muscles on his face were unable to take on any other expression.

The leper put the money on the threshold. The arrack shop owner, with disgust, poured liquor into his glass. The leper drank the arrack. Then, he wiped his face, pressing hard. His fingers were only stunted. They had not fallen off. Nor were they deformed. The leper lingered on...

"Hey you, if have got any more money left with you, go and buy a bowl of boiled tapioca, go...."

The leper walked back. He sat on an exposed root of the Ungu tree from which drops were still falling. He then started to sing, keeping time on the glass with his stunted fingers:

Kya mil gaya bhagvan, thumko dilke dukha se....

Soman listened in rapt attention. The song got entwined with his memories. His singing was mellifluous. Besides, it had the clarity of expression brought about by someone who understood the meaning of the song.

"Will you go away from here or not...or do you want me to pour hot water on you?"

The song stopped. Soman was again left alone. He tried to protest.

"Why do you make so much of that poor wretch sitting there and singing?"

"No, sir, if he goes on singing, those who come here will buy him more liquor making this place hell."

Soman lifted his head and looked. The leper was walking away.

"He seems to have wandered all over Northern India. They say he had a job in the Police or in the Military. After living a life of vice, now he has come back with all these diseases..."

The shop owner's words were addressed to no one in particular.

Soman did not say anything. Heavy shadows rolled away through his mind again.

Is Meenu related to me in any way?

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Is she related to anybody in this world in any way?

Perhaps, she craftily steals a night from the others to make bed for me for a night sleep...Do I have to buy so many chains just for that? Just then, he remembered: Isn't the practice that demands the smothering of one's desires, mere cowardice? The ability to distance oneself from Meenu, or blindly giving in to her...which is cowardice?

He rose.

Not just for today.

I will never ever step into Meenu's house.

He remembered another thing just then. Will the mind which has been throbbing the whole day, rest cool? When I lie without being able to sleep, at one stage in the night, will I open the door on my own and go out calling Meenu...Meenu....

Practical wisdom advised another thing. He bought a bottle of liquor and kept it packed, just in case he needed it to induce sleep. The shop owner looked him in the face.

That look was filled with questions.

You have already drunk more than you ordinarily drin. Should you carry more?

Soman walked. The first rains which disappeared after a mere drizzle, only increased the humidity.

Moonshine spreads. Only some silvery were clouds left in the sky.

When he walked past a public water tap, he remembered–

Is this the first tap? If yes, there are three more taps to come.

He saw two men sitting by the roadside. Their words mingled with laughter and speech. In the clear moonlight, Soman could easily recognize them.

They were the man and the leper who had visited the arrack shop a while ago. Two bottles were there before them on the ground. An empty bottle was lying on the ground.

That man's voice:

"It is paddy fields all around once you leave Mandla. Very beautiful. There are small villages in between. In Burmese, villages are called *yong*. It was there in a Karen village..."

Soman stood listening to the talk. He stopped suddenly. Against Soman's expectations, that man laughed. He then took the bottle and opened it.

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It had twisted dry banana leaf as cork, which shone of moisture... The man extended the glass filled by him to Soman. The air which had become clear after the rain fizzled with the odour of country liquor. The permeating smell jerked Soman into wakefulness. Declining the offer, he said:

"I just need the glass."

The man gave him the glass after emptying it of the arrack. Soman walked to the water tap with the glass. The tap, which was defective, was hissing...There was a circle of gravel and red earth around the glass placed on the wet ground. Soman held the glass right below the tap. Sand and gravel mixed with the wings of moth-termites came gushing forth. Soman took the liquor with the water collected from the tap. He then walked back.

Now, it was the leper who was speaking:

"The places I mention are now in Pakistan, eighteen miles away from Rawalpindi...do you know what they call country liquor there, *junglie sharaab*...it was because of that her mother was called *junglie budi*."

Soman put down the glass. The leper snatched it away. He poured contry liquor from the bottle and drank greedily in gulps.

Soman walked. It bubbled inside his skull. Apart from producing an electrifying sensation, it was weaving a web of something else as well. Innumerable human forms took shape in his mind...both known and unknown human faces. All of them led him to one—his own face...

All the voices were overpowered by his own voice. The words he would once say sitting by the roadside with his legs stretched...

The arrack shop...the road leading to the west...After walking past the first, second, and third water taps, at the fourth tap....

Soman stomped the ground with force. He walked fast forcefully stamping on the ground hoping for the thoughts blossoming in his brain to drop off....

He walked past the gate of Meenu. He felt like laughing aloud as he knew he could rescue his mind and body enamoured of her.

He speeded up his walking. Some voice, with its pitch increasing bit by bit, came from behind. The voice was mixed.

Both footfalls and panting could be heard.

Soman looked back.

Meenu!

Meenu stood close to him. Her starched and dry clothes exuded the warmth of a wardrobe. Her panting brushed against his wet shirt and warmed him up.

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The moist lips of Meenu opened. In the moonshine, Soman could easily see the soft hairs on the corner of her upper lip. The soft moustache which loomed hazily was even now capable of driving him crazy.

"Do you have any thought about me sitting, my eyes straining on the road? Human love goes only this far, doesn't it?"

The plaintive tone of her voice reminded him of the many sleepless nights he had spent in Meenu's bedroom.

"Come."

Meenu walked back. Walking a little, she stopped again. Meenu looked back intently.

The look of a puppeteer who watches by turns, the string on his fingertip and the movements of the puppet.

Translated from Malayalam by K.M. Ajir Kutty



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H S Shiva Prakash

O Water-diviner!

O water-diviner! O water-diviner!
Show me where is the well-spring,
The wet eye of earth's core,
The compassion of clouds and rocks

Coco water Limca water
Water imprisoned in bottles
Water enchanted by sly
Magicians of market
Sweat-water blood-water—
Drunken on all these waters
My tongue has turned a burning shard
Fires are raging in the heart
Famine is spreading in the guts

Auctioned rivers are crying out
O water-diviner! O water-diviner!
Dying oceans are crying out
O water-diviner! O water-diviner
Wells full of corpses are crying out
O water-diviner! O water-diviner
No end to the cry of ponds
O water-diviner! O water-diviner
Ponds and wells, rivers and oceans
Are crying out in a chorus
O water-diviner! O water-diviner
No more coolness in our water
No strength to quench thirst
Tell us where is the well-spring

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The spring of sweet cooling water
That can quench all our thirst

In the midst of day's endless labour
And, at night, catching fire
Like will-o-the wisp
Beings of our secret dreams
Are constantly crying out
In every human tongue
In every cry of every beast
And in silences
Of destroyed crops
And lifeless things:
O water-diviner! O water-diviner
Wake up your sleeping wand
Turn it towards the wellspring
O when will you tell all of us
Look! Here it is!
The panacea for all ills
The life-giving gurgling water
Here it is! Right here!

O water-diviner! O water-diviner

(2007)

Translated by the Poet

To Tehri About to Go Under Water

The city of Tehri
About to go under water
Whispered to my heart
For the first time
And then again
A second time.
"Look, the hour of my destruction
Is come. A thousand year's history

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Is about to end. The last worship
Is being offered in my temples.
Listen to the tolling bells
Reverberating among my hills
And over my cliffs down my slopes
And deep within my valleys;
Re-echoed by the tiny houses
Above and below, the houses
Always contented though not always lucky;
Over my farmlands, wet and dry;
Down my mountain roads hard to decipher
Like a mysterious alphabet;
Through the vegetation and life-forms
Belonging only to my threatened Himalayan lap.
Even that indescribably delicious *singuri*
Sold only in my sweet stalls
Is about to drown.
So will all my memories and hopes
Cradles and tombs.

Stay here please,
Till the final moment
Making songs
Of my great anguish
And inevitable death."

I replied,
"Listen, O drowning city
I have passed through you two times.
I will come back to you
For a third time only if
You survive drowning
In the impending *pralaya*
If either of us cannot survive
Let us part as defeated friends.
Goodbye!"

Translated by the Poet

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Dear Friend Joe

It has collapsed:
The colossal building
Your black finger pointed to
On that New York morning
Shining white—
The symbol of the victory
Of white capitalists
Built on the remnants
Of our ancestral lands
With the broken limbs
Of our gods and goddesses
(How can our innocent gods and goddesses
outsmart the craft and cunning
Of businessmen?)

But, dear friend Joe,
What pulled it down
Was not the whirlwind of change
We were dreaming of;
Even after the fall
Our gods and goddesses did not return
To their temples
Neither did our children
Return home

Look! Winged monstrous sand dunes
Of final darkness
Covering the face of the setting sun
Behind the ruins
Of that building

Screams
Once again
Mutilated corpses
Once again

Tell me, dear friend Joe,
Why is only sin the solution
For the sins of our world?

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Why does goodness,
Like you,
Climbing up and down the staircase
Of the dirt-filled apartment
Of your Harlem home
Beaten and lamed
By the bastards of civilization?
Meanwhile
Skewed beings born of fear
Their hands and legs in different directions
Their eyes and noses in different directions,
Drunken,
Steal and kill each other
While a blind knife or a pistol
Lurks for them in the gloom.

Dear friend Joe
Has your rickety house survived
With its memories of broken marriages?

Has the fear of sudden attacks
By unknown hands
Still survived?

Such things survive, I know
Whether empires rise or fall
The huts of the poor will survive for ever

Though
Your Gandhi
Our Luther are both dead

When gods and goddesses vanish
Earth needs
Insects to go on mothering

Translated by the Poet

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Laxmipati Kolar

What are You, You Pecking at the Soul?

I know you
Who wake up like ghosts in distorted nights
Push darkness into darker darkness
Thrust silence into bags of void
And swoop on me
From the wounds of deathlike moments
You swooped on me in the past
I can spot your faces

You who wake us up quietly
Peel layer by layer
The soul, the skin inside the body,
And tear at it in front of me!
You can eat up the deer's orphaned fear
When he is out of mother's sight
You are crueller than jungle cats

I have seen you shapeless ones,
Seen your advent frightening to death-goddess too
Seen your nails sharpest in the world
I have seen and known them all
For how many more nights
Will you go on gobbling up hapless souls
Making every cold night traumatic?
When will your demon-hunger cease?

What are you gobbling up anguished souls?
Wayward agonies?
Cruel deities?

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Eternal virgins gifting sorrows to us?
Don't enter my door-less nights
Drown me in inhuman silence
For ever if you like

Translated by H. S. Shiva Prakash

You, Eyes which Soak the Night....

You, eyes which soak the night!
What else did you long to see for ever?

The dim eyes
Soaking the speech and the soul...
O memories knocking down contemplation's door!
What wonder do you want to peck at?

Even the dying memories of celebration
Revolve round benumbing grief

You strange feelings saddening delusions
What bitter truths of togetherness
You want to whisper to us,
Those truths imprisoning themselves in shackles
Of shyness?

I am surviving
In alien nights
Of soaked eyes
Truths of unspoken sorrows
The remaining truths of the day
Are more insignificant
Than death

Translated by H. S. Shiva Prakash

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Ramzan Darga

A Very Old Poem

Mine is a very old school—
The music of the souls
Crushed beneath huge palaces.

Mine is very old grief—
Dwelling next to those
Turned into corpses
After building pyramids

Mine is a very old joy—
Shining on the faces of the poor
Who, forgetting their woes
Danced

Mine is a very old heart
Full of a beautiful dream
Of life without fleecing

Mine is a very old poem—
The mansion of longings
Of those wearing out
With nonstop labour

Communism Means

Communism means
A dream
Coming true

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Removing the dust
Making things shine

Communism means
Worshipping the world
With pen, axe, plough
And other implements

Communism means:
Thinking of another as one's own self;
Correcting your steps
When they go wrong

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Communism means
Fighting a jehad
With one's own self;
Confessing
Even to the humblest child
Of the world;
Growing up into a true human being
Bit by bit

Communism means
Watching with delight
The flowering of a rose;
Blowing, like a breeze,
Through the entire world;
Removing the dust
From every home;
Hating hate

Communism means
Seeing five elements
As belonging also to the future;
Coming out free like a butterfly
From the egg and insect;
Giving up caste
Within and without
To be free from class

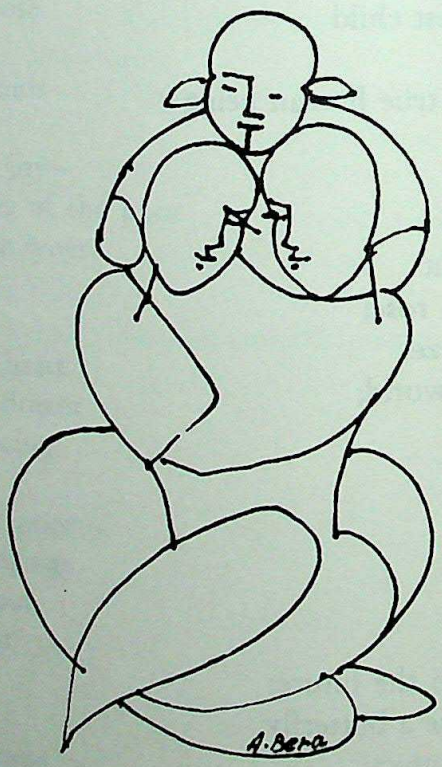
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Communism means
Working for
Creepers in the country
Kinspeople in the city;

Communism means
Meditating
With awareness of every grain
On the sun's first ray

Translated by H. S. Shiva Prakash



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Satish Kulkarni

To Lineman Bheemappa of the Washerman Caste

You turned into a roadside corpse
You king of street lamps!
Have you entered the dark
You light-giver?

You stubborn follower of processions
You last of voices crying out
You are lost
Is it proper?

You blind pitcher
Unlit by desires
You gutter water of despair
Is your exit proper?

You brave rider
Of bicycle too high for your legs
You Gandhi of my street play
That travelled from town to town

You talkative washerman
Wearing dirty clothes
But giving washed clothes

You penury-stricken badshah
Of rich smiles!
Tell me:
Where is your empire now?

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You soldier without arms
Of shoes too big for the feet

Always regular in salaaming sahib
Bowing down to every house
Have you forgotten your own house?
O crazy elder!

2

You dug up pits
To plant pillars
Giving light

You sported with the cobra
Of everyday

'Look! Sahib has left
Look! Sahib has arrived'

Sold out,
Your house of light
And mine!

Before I salaam any one
Shall I forget you
O lineman Bhimappa the Washerman?

Translated by H. S. Shiva Prakash

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Savita Nagabhushana

Don't

Don't frighten me
I will touch and feel the fire

Don't stop me
I will jump into the ocean
And swim

Don't laugh
I will ride a mirage-horse

Don't sniff
I build a sand castle

Don't wake me up
Let me brood over eggs

Don't be angry
I am lost in love-god

Don't pluck
I will flower

Don't call me
I want to be here

Don't...Don't...Don't...
Don't follow me in vain

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Footpath Alone is not Enough....

Hungry,
I surrendered to trees

Thirsty,
I bowed down to rivers

My heart was won
By to the lovely-teethed gorava
To hills
To parrots, koel birds

To soft breezes
I folded my hands

Why should a doer
Be shackled by the word?
I shrugged off the end
And moved on

When the time is ripe
Even a footpath is enough
To lead to Kadali

Does not Channamallikarjuna
Know this?

Translated by H. S. Shiva Prakash

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Black Cobras

Banu Mushtaq

It was late evening, time for *Isham Namaz*. Tarannum, shielding the 'Arabbi'* book with her veil, came running in calling out for her mother. Her hair was wet in the rain.

"Ammi.... Ammi..." Rafiya was busy grilling the dried fish. Tarannum gasped, "Ammi...Haseena and her mother are in the mosque..."

"Um...Why?"

"It is for the claim."

"Oh...is it...?"

Rafi was sent to the Arabbi Madrasa to study. He slept and conveniently forgot his books there when he came back home running. Vaseema, his sister, caught him on his way and forcibly tried to feed him. He had no patience with her that day. Pushing her hand aside, he said, "Ammi... Haseena and her mother have been in the mosque for a long time."

"Why...at this time of the night?"

"It is about their claim I believe."

"Oh...is it that..?"

Hameed, Rafiya's son was busy exchanging the labels of matchboxes and pictures of actors and actresses for chalk pieces in the Madrasa. His pocket was full of chalk pieces. His toothache began to trouble him so much that he came home crying with pain, but did not fail to report to his mother:

"Ammi.... Haseena's..."

As the children, one by one, were reporting the news of Haseena to the mother, Majeeda arrived. To avoid the slush dirtying her pyjama she lifted it a little high, held the *Koran* close to her bosom, and entered

* The Kannada word for the Arabic language

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the house. She stopped suddenly when she saw her father sitting relaxed. Keeping the *Koran* on the table she asked,

"Abba...why didn't you go to the mosque?"

"Oh it is now time for *Isham Namaz*... there is still time for the *Jamaath* to assemble," he said, slowly setting the cap on his head.

"I am not talking about *Namaz*... There...in the mosque...Haseena and her mother are waiting for you...I heard that their verdict would be given today..."

"Oh.... yes. What did you say? Did you say that that woman is sitting in the mosque? Where does she sit in the mosque?" Muthavalli Sahib had completely forgotten his own instructions for the *Panchayat* meeting. He began to ponder.

"Oh... Abbajan....She is waiting there...they are sitting near the *Janaja*.. Haseena and her mother...her two younger sisters...all of them...you must go immediately ...poor souls...they are suffering from the chilly weather..."

"Rains...cold climate...how nice to warm up...*Ceylony parata*, peppered *fall*, chicken kabab and a drink that goes burning down the throat...." "To warm up more...perhaps Ameena...In spite of mothering seven children in ten years she looks young and her body is still firm..." Muthavalli Sahib's thought lingered on the strange smell of her clothes smeared with garlic, ginger and garam masala.... His reverie would have continued if she herself had not appeared before him like a hen set to fight. Muthavalli Sahib ventured a side-glance at her.

"I am tired. You hardly listen to me. Nobody gets married at my age...but I am already an old woman."

"What is it now...?"

"What is it...? I cannot straighten my back...it is throbbing... children...household...family...do I have a minute's free time to rest...If I go on with delivering children like this, very soon these children will be motherless..."

"Shh...Why all that now...? I am looking after you well. See... I am Muthavalli...If people come to know that I am allowing you to undergo an operation to avoid having children...what can I answer them?" Before he could continue further Ameena moved away as she saw someone at the doorstep.

"*Assalam Va Alykum* Muthavalli Sahib."

"*Va Alykum Salam*... yeah Yakoob... you are late...She has been waiting for a long time...something has to be decided...don't you think...?"

"You are there to decide everything...is there any law that she knows better than you....I shall obey your orders. How about having dinner before we proceed to..."

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"Dinner...I am not very particular," said Muthavalli Sahib.

"How can you say so... first your dinner... after that the proceedings...I have brought the autorickshaw. It is waiting for you outside..."

"Oh...dinner...Muthavalli cannot think of his comforts...He should be ready to sacrifice...home, family, comforts, everything. Even if people call at midnight for guidance or to settle matters, he should be ready ...did you follow me?" he scowled.

"Tchu! Tchu! Don't misunderstand me...the law of God says that a man can marry not just once but four times. So why should this female come shamelessly to the mosque...? I waited not just one year but ten years to get a male child from her. She was incompetent. What a row! She has escaped all moral fibre in her dealings. I married another woman. What is wrong with that? I used to visit her whenever I considered it necessary. Just the other day I saw Haseena on the way. I gave her a lift home in my rickshaw. I gave her ten rupees too. I am also a human being. Being a woman, can't she at least adjust that much...?"

Ameena cursed from her 'behind the door' position- "Aha... what sugar-coated words! When he wants pleasure he speaks of God, of the *Koran*, to prove himself right. But he escapes when it comes to sparing some money for that poor lady...Oh God! When will you enlighten them?" silently she walked off.

"Oh...O.K. Once you start, you never stop...," saying this, Muthavalli Sahib got ready to go. When they got on to the road, Yakoob said, "We shall go to Hotel Princess. Nobody can see us in the family room."

"It should be a safe place. If anybody sees...it will only create a problem...who can answer them...you know very well what these people are like. What rains...how bitter is the blowing wind! Yeah Ameena...I am going out. It will be late when I return. Shut the door."

In response, the loud knock of vessels and Ameena's increased grumbling was heard. "Muthavalli...ha...Muthavalli...What sort of a man... Does he properly do *Namaz* five times a day...at least for being a Muthavalli? Has he stopped watching the movies? Forget it...has he stopped drinking the urine of Satan? Let his Muthavalli come to an end...."

Muthavalli was not there to listen to this. The sound of the auto rickshaw was loud. It was leaving. In the biting chill, in the desolate silence of the mosque, the unfortunate Ashraf sat like a devil. "Poor woman. What is her fault? Was it her fault that she produced only girls? Are we able to roll them like rotis the way we want..." Ameena felt bitter. She went out through the backdoor. Crossing the backyard she walked towards the high wall of the mosque. Close to the wall she had arranged a few big stones to have an access to the happenings in the mosque.

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It served the purpose of listening to the special sermons in the mosque and as and when necessary to pass a few buckets of water from the mosque to her house. She stood upon the stones and covered her face with the veil to hide from the view of the people in the mosque. One by one the people were leaving the mosque through the main entrance after the *Isham Namaz*. She peered a little more. Oh! Ashraf was shrivelled in the north corner. Her head was covered with the *pallu* of her discoloured sari. Her threadbare sari sheltered the child on her lap. Close to her was Haseena stretched on the icy cold ground. Three-year-old Habeeba was half on the floor desperately attempting to warm the other half on her mother's lap.

Each one who came for the *Namaz* looked at her inquisitively while leaving. They were all eager to return home. Happiness was waiting for them in different forms. In one house it was delicious spicy *Biryani*, in the other house it was the hot fish curry and in another house it was the new bride and in yet another house the toddler son who was learning to walk. The hurried steps were moving towards happy homes.

Ashraf was still waiting. The incessant rain of forty-eight hours was not enough to cool her burning resolution. The chill piercing through her bones was too weak to shake her spirit. The sharp nails of hunger tore her intestines but failed to diminish her resolution. She was tapping at the dodgy doors of Allah. Not for her profit. She was seeking justice for her children. She was all set to get her children their due right to live. She was standing alone to query—why am I punished for no fault of mine? But...the doors of Allah's house seemed to be closed to her. The lifeless faces of her children made her resolute.

The child on her lap moved. She looked at her child. The sick child looked dark in the dim light of the mosque. The child breathed heavily making a sound with its blocked nose. She could see the hollow pits below the expanding ribs. The eyes that were closed were caked with sty. The child's body burnt with fever. She gazed at the child...

Munny, her child...the problems had reached the peak after she was born. Though Yakoob was disappointed when the first two were girls, he was responsible enough to take care of the family. She could save some amount and buy some jewellery. She was able to acquire silver anklets, a golden chain and other trinkets. When the third child turned out to be a girl again, he escaped from the scene. He did not come to the hospital to see her. He started boarding in his mother's house. Ashraf survived on cooked leaves. The same tea leaves were boiled over and over again to make it last for three days. She made various efforts to bring her husband back home. She went to the market place with the newborn baby on her shoulder to meet her husband.

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She knelt at his feet, cried and begged with him to have mercy on her. She even threatened him saying "Allah will destroy you." But her efforts were futile.

When all doors of hope were closed, she began to work in Juleka Begum's house. Work was not a burden to her. But she had to stay there the whole day even when there was no work. Juleka Begum's husband was employed in an office. Her two children were studying in college. Juleka Begum used to read for the whole day. Once looking up from her book she asked Ashraf, "What is your husband?" "He runs the auto rickshaw Apa..." "His income must be sufficient to run the family..." "Yes... once upon a time..." Her mind was preoccupied with Munny who was at home under the care of little Haseena. Her breasts tightened with milk. The blouse was wet with the oozing milk. "The baby must be hungry..." She was stifled with agony. "Why are you working then?" Ashraf's story made Juleka Begum wonder whether even now people could be like that? "Do you know Ashraf, if a girl is born Prophet's *Salam* visits the house." " Oh... no Apa... How many times can the Prophet's *Salam* visit a poor woman's house." "You are mad. The Prophet himself had only daughters. One boy was born but he died young. How much he used to love his daughters. You know that Bibi Fathima was the very life to him. The father and the daughter were the symbol of intimate relationship." Ashraf could not make head or tail of what she said. Her thoughts wandered around Munny. At last Juleka said, "This is gross injustice. Why don't you submit an application to the mosque?" "Ahey! Why didn't it occur to me? Can you please write one for me?" She made repeated visits to Muthavalli Sahib's house to submit the application. But he was not available. One day she was lucky enough to put it in his hands as he was going out of his house. Carelessly he pushed it into his coat pocket and went off without a word to her. The life on the road seemed busy as he walked. The street tap kept the women busy in the morning. Haneefa Aunty was busy sweeping the yard but her sweeping went beyond the yard to the street. She moved away with reverence to Muthavalli. Rafiya who came to collect the water from the street tap moved back into her house when she saw Muthavalli sahib. All the women cleared off from the street within no time when they came to know of Muthavalli's arrival. Muthavalli Sahib was satisfied with the respect shown by the women. He looked sideways to see whether anybody was watching him.

When Ashraf did not hear from Muthavalli Sahib even after fifteen days, she went to his house. Muthavalli Sahib, as usual, was not at home. Ameena asked Ashraf who sat waiting for him, "Is it true that if a

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woman undergoes operation to avoid having children she will not get *jannath*?"

"I don't know. Juleka would know. She always has thick books with her." Ameena came very close to her and cautiously whispered into her ears: "Then...can you ask her and tell me whether it is true when you come next?"

"O.K...she tells me lots of things. But I am so stupid that I don't understand anything...."

As the last word was uttered, Muthavalli Sahib entered the house and seeing Ashraf his face turned grouchy.

"Oh...your application is lost. If you want...write another one." He hurried into his room.

If I want...hum...I don't want the husband. But my hungry children.... In spite of Ashraf's great care, Munny, of late, had begun to lose weight and looked weak. Her limbs were thin and the belly was bulging out. Ashraf was never weary of Munny's leaking nose, devilish hunger and loud shrieks. She could never be a nuisance to her. In fact she showered extra love and care on her. But, essentially, Munny needed medicines. Where can she get money for her? Injections, tablets, tonic and doctor's fee...Waiting in the long queue for her turn...She was able to give a tablet once in a while. It had absolutely no effect. The sickness was spreading fast. By the time Ashraf was ready with another application to submit to Muthavalli Sahib, she heard the dreadful news—'Yakoob is not in town. He is absconding.' "He is a male. He can choose between being present and learning...tolerate and not tolerate...who will question him? Has he to answer anyone? His past never haunts him...his present does not trouble him...his future does not mock him...He need not answer anybody. He is beyond the need for apology. Because, his faults are never faults." Ashraf felt very sorry. She held Munny close to her. But what Munny needed was not just her mother's love...She needed medical treatment... In another six months she grew skinny.

Ashraf got the news that Yakoob was back in town. She raced to the rickshaw stand. The minute Yakoob saw her he vanished. She learnt to be clever. Along with the children she cautiously approached from behind and sat in his auto. He drove the auto to her shack and stopped it. "You are wandering like a bitch with your daughters. Have some shame." He spat and forced two children on the ground. She was bewildered; she got down...the auto raced away. Her eyes were full. She embraced her weeping children.

The future was bleak to her. She submitted an application to the mosque committee and to Muthavalli Sahib seeking justice for her children.

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She pleaded for help from her husband to defray the medical expenses of the sick child. She was given the same answer—"Come later...go away now...come back later..." In the meantime she got the news that 'Yakoob was going to marry again. He wants a son to run his auto rickshaw.' Ashraf's fragile world collapsed right before her eyes. She spent the night weeping. She went to Muthavalli Sahib in the morning. Muthavalli Sahib came out with scowl "What?"

Ashraf narrated her problem. Muthavalli Sahib coughed and went out to spit out the phlegm. "What wrong has he done? What is so big about second marriage? He has not eloped with anybody. Let him marry. Do you know that the *shariyat* law allows a man to marry four times? Why are you green-eyed? All women are the same...resentful of the 'other' " saying this Muthavalli looked at Ameena from the corner of his eyes. Ameena busy with feeding the young baby wondered "what a man!" She felt that the day was not very far when she would have to make her children stand in a row and plead like Asahraf. In a feeble voice Ashraf said, "Let him be married not once but a thousand times...I am not covetous. Let him be happy. I will not trouble him. But...Muthavalli Sahib this child is dying...for its medicine at least..." Before she could complete the sentence Muthavalli Sahib roared, "See, don't talk like a fool...death...is in the hands of Hayath Allah. Even when a rock falls over the head some people don't die. Do you know why? Because Allah wishes them life. Likewise...If Allah so wishes, your child will survive; otherwise it will die. So why do you torment him for that...?"

Ashraf had no answer. Oh, yes...! She tried to console herself with the saying "Everything happens according to God's will." But she could not sit quietly when the child developed severe dysentery. Whom to seek help from? Yakoob was living with his new wife in her place.

Next time when Ashraf saw him, his nails were dyed with *mehandi*. The wristwatch shone as if it were new. He was well-dressed and was wearing a new pair of shoes. With his new hairstyle Yakoob appeared a total stranger to her.

Ashraf became bitter about her life. Munny's struggle between life and death made her resolute. Juleka Begum said to her, "See...there should be a genuine reason for a man to marry four times. In case it is wartime and many men die in the war, then a man can marry more than once. In case the wife is suffering from chronic ailment or if she is a barren woman then he can marry again...He can marry again if the wife fails to satisfy his physical urges...." Before Juleka Begum could proceed further, Ashraf burst out in anger, " I do not belong to any of these categories...don't

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I have children...isn't it wrong to abandon me? Isn't it wrong to desert my children on the street...?"

"See...the *shariyat* law says that even when he marries the second time he should be fair to both of them."

"In what way...I did not get the point."

" If he builds a house for you he should build a similar one for her. If he buys a sari for you he should buy one for her. When he spends a night with you he should spend a night with her too...."

Ashraf's eyes were full. "I don't ask for all that. I just want him to open his purse a bit to save my child's life...I won't bother him...still...don't you think ...what he is doing is wrong?"

"Of course...hundred percent he is at fault."

"Then why is Muthavalli Sahib not speaking about it at all?"

See...that's where the fault lies. Many of our *Jannaths*, Muthavallis have not studied the law properly. Secondly, they cannot implement laws. Thirdly nobody listens to them...whatever is convenient for them in the law of the country, they abide by it. Where is law in the *Shariyat* now... if it is there it is in your lap as Munny..."

"Is there no remedy Apa..."

"There is. Why not? The intellectuals and scholars who impose laws on the women folk...why are they quiet about the path open to women? The world has changed now... I can say...the world thinks at least some thing good should be done to women...these people who own the *Koran* ...let them follow what is written in it. Let them educate the girls. Not just the *Madrasa* education, they should be sent to schools and colleges. Let her have the right to choose her husband...these impotent men...instead of living on the dowry, let them pay *mohur* and marry. Let the parents offer them their due share of property. If the husband and wife lack compatibility, let her have the right to divorce him. When she divorces him let there be men to receive her as bride. Let men be ready to marry a widow..."

"Apa ...Apa...what are you saying...?" Ashraf began to feel confused.

"What I am saying is right Ashraf... In Islam a woman has all these rights. She can go to school...go to shop...can work...can share life in the outside world. But...there is also a command, not to display the body...."

Juleka's words were charged with emotion. Ashraf nodded her head disappointed. She did not want all that.

"What can I ask for my child Munny...?"

"What... Your living expenses, the expenses of your children, a shelter for you, alternate nights with him...all these are your rights. He must provide

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it. In case he declines, in public, catch the loafer's collar and demand it from him. And that Muthavalli, slap him with the slippers and demand your rights. Don't plead. Demand justice. Do you know who gets justice? The ones who demand it sternly. People like you never get justice. Write to the mosque authorities. Call for the *Panchayat* meet. Inform me. I shall teach your husband and that Muthavalli the meaning of the *Shariyat*... the meaning of justice. It is not justice when the *Koran* and *Hadees* are turned according to their convenience against the timid and silent women..."

Ashraf was frightened. Her limbs were cold. She wouldn't have got into any of these things if she had been alone. She would have relied on God. But...Munny....Right now she is in the mosque, not to plead for justice. She was determined to snatch it. Munny began to whimper in her lap. Her breathing was accompanied by a strange sound.

Sweat formed a row of beads on her forehead. Her neck was wet. Ashraf wiped the child's neck and the armpit. She touched her forehead to feel the temperature. She was relieved that the fever had subsided. She quickly looked for Haseena who had been crying for food till the previous minute. Her heart chilled when she saw her on the mat in the *Janaja*. She had rolled herself in the mat. Habeeba was curled on the floor.

The silent void of green light, the chilly wind blowing and the ceaseless rains, frightened her though she was in the mosque. She felt an odd fear. She did not know the time. She feared that worldly business has come to a standstill all of a sudden. She uttered *"Bismillah Hirrahamanirraheem..."* the prayer that every Muslim utters day and night; the merciful and kind Allah's heart must have broken. Munny was warm in her mother's lap. The other two had scanty clothing. Simultaneously, a thousand pairs of scissors were plying in her belly. She heaved a deep sigh. "Hey! Allah!" Allah did not answer. He was far away...warm...quiet. Her stomach chilled. Her blood was cold. She was freezing to death. She failed to recognise the voice that called her. At last she could hear the voice of Ameena faintly.

Ameena was standing behind the compound wall with a plate in her hand. "Ashraf...take...here is *roti* for you...come fast...take..." Ashraf slowly returned to the real world. The law of this merciless world poured forth the rains incessantly. Beyond that yonder...*roti*...a demonic strength flowed in her. Clasping Munny tightly, she stood up. Then...

The gate of the mosque creaked. Muthavalli Sahib and Yakoob slowly walked in. They were in the pinnacle of delight. Muthavalli Sahib stroked his belly and belched gently. He spat the liquid of *Jurda beeda*,

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his lips were dyed red with the liquid, he stood on the steps of the mosque premises. Yakoob also came leisurely and stood at a distance "what a woman.. .she is still here" he wondered at her will power. Ameena's plate slowly moved away.

Almost all the families that lived around the mosque had finished their dinner. Men were either watching TV or were already in bed. Giving fake excuses the women had stayed awake and had settled near the compound wall of the mosque. They were standing on the elevated platforms that they had set to peep into the mosque. Ashraf held Munny, the spirit of her uprising close to her bosoms, and walked slowly towards them. Muthavalli Sahib was seated on the topmost step. To his left, one step below, Yakoob was standing. To his right, slightly away, three-four steps below was positioned Ashraf. As there was roofing above she was protected from the rains. Still, the blowing, freezing wind drew out her strength and made her stand still. Yakoob was ready like a bull that is set to attack. The water drops from the rooftop dripped on her back and flowed down. She marvelled "Oh! How respectful are the rains towards men. They do not touch men."

Muthavalli Sahib found it difficult to speak as his mouth was full of the gathered *jarda* liquid. He couldn't spit it on the holy steps. He was about to go out when Yakoob bellowed.

"Muthavalli Sahib, what does that bastard want?" Muthavalli Sahib became alert. He suddenly swallowed the liquid. It made him giddy for a minute. He became mindful of his position. He swiftly became conscious of the surrounding compound and the women-shaped lizards sticking to the walls. He was dead sure that among them was the lizard called Ameena sticking firmly to the wall and staring at him. Therefore, for his survival his conscience became alert, the food hosted by Yakoob stuck in his throat. "Yeah...Yakoob...don't talk like that" he said. But Yakoob was not in a position to listen. This woman...She had turned his life into hell. She was like shit stuck to the feet... "Mothering three daughters she has ruined me murderously! She is haunting me like a devil when I want to live with my new wife happily and get a boy from her, who can become the owner of my auto. Gafur, Nasir, Idris have married twice and are enjoying their life. Their wives are not troubling them. Either they are working or they have gone back to their mothers. This bitch has not only been following me for the past two years but has also made me step into the mosque to settle her justice. This female..."Yakoob was furious.

"Ley! If you who do it sitting, should have so much guts, how much more guts should I, who do it standing, have...?" He roared

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emphasizing his dominant position—Ashraf couldn't utter a word. She was stunned. Juleka begum had not taught her how to answer this. She had not expected such a question. She was perplexed and she held Munny tighter. But...by then ...Yakoob who was boiling with fury walked towards her and gathering all his strength, ferociously kicked her. As he was positioned on the higher step his attack on Ashraf flung her to a distance. Though she tried to protect Munny, she was helpless. She was thrown away from the mother and her forehead hit the ground...a loud shriek of pain filled the void of the mosque. The shriek woke up her other two children. Even Haseena who was inside the funeral cart! Perhaps thousands of corpses carried in that cart had woken up...but...Ashraf was unconscious.

Muthavalli Sahib was astounded. His intoxication from the liquor was completely gone. Tearing the veil of darkness, facing the attack of cold and rains, clearing the feet off the ground, the heads covered...countless women came...Some of them lifted Ashraf...Some more went towards Munny. Munny's fever had subsided. The heavy breath had stopped. No agony. No pain. She was free from all the pains of this world.

Muthavalli Sahib was sitting as if in a daze. Haneefa Aunty took Ashraf to her house. Munny's corpse remained in the mosque. All the lamps in the mosque were burning. The water started boiling in the drum behind the mosque. Slowly the sleeping men woke up. Cloth merchant Matheen Sahib silently opened his shop and brought the red *alvan* shroud. Munny was bathed, and was draped in red cloth; the perfume was smeared on her body and she was carried to the burial ground.

Ashraf cried bitterly. But somewhere in the remote corner of her heart there was a thread of contentment. She is relieved of pain and she has relieved me also from pain...Hereafter I need not follow him pleading...I need not go behind Muthavalli begging...I need not answer inhuman questions...Let me share my life with my two children...Yet...poor Munny...She never enjoyed new clothes...Never was blessed with a doll to play with. Right from her birth she was gulping bitter medicine...the mother in her wept incessantly...

Muthavalli Sahib could not sleep the whole night. That night Ameena did not come anywhere near him. He went for the morning *Namaz*. He did not feel like talking to anybody. He sat on the first step of the mosque. The incident of the night...was it a dream or was it real... or was it a movie... after a long time, opening the gate of the mosque he turned towards home. The whole women folk of the *mohalla* who used to hide at the sound of the gate of the mosque...today seemed to be occupied in their work.

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Muthavalli Sahib walked with a slow pace. Hanifa Aunty had reached the middle of the road in her sweeping. She started sweeping erratically with vigour. She was least bothered when the slush splattered on Muthavalli Sahib. She held the broom in the right hand and smacked its end on the left palm, addressing the air she said, "Let Allah's curse fall on you, I have seen the Satan face to face now...." Rafiya came to keep the pot under the tap. She picked a stone, threw it into the gutter and directed her words laughing at the dog that was not there, "dog means dog." Naseema stared at her cock with vengeance, which went over Hameeda's hen that was walking slowly on its short legs and white plumes spread over its back. She generously cursed the hen that she had brought up, "Hey! Allah...let the pedigree of these cocks be ruined with your blessings...No shame at all...No fear of Allah...fattening the body to feed the worms in the grave, you donkey-faced man, let you be ruined..."

Corner-house Khajee Sahib's daughter-in-law who had never come up to the gate in her two years of married life was seen near the compound gate. She was looking at her husband going on the scooter. When she saw Muthavalli Sahib she directed her words at the child in her arms and said, "Do you want to see Gorilla...see! See there that is the gorilla." When Muthavalli sahib turned a round to see she laughed mockingly and shut the door at his face.

At the far end of the street Jameela Aunty was yelling at somebody, "Nothing good will happen to you...on the day of the *Kayamath* you will be born with the face of a pig....Let black cobras be twined around you. At the moment of your death let you not be able to utter *kalima.*" Her curse flowed eloquently like bursting crackers.

Asifa came with a bin overflowing with waste. She did not bother to cover her head with the pallu that had fallen away. She threw the waste into the garbage bin and started spitting with all force, "Thu...thu..." Not very sure that it had not touched him.

Muthavalli Sahib could not erase from his memory, Munny's face covered with red *alvani.* Though her eyes were closed, he felt that she was glaring at him. Clamour pounced on him from all directions. His torso became heavy and his legs refused to walk. He felt that each grain of Biriyani had turned in to an iron ball and was pounding inside him. The drink that he had had...appeared like Satan's urine as Ameena said. He was frightened that the stench of it would drown him. He began to feel sick in his stomach. With great difficulty he climbed the steps of his house and hazily saw that Ameena was getting ready to go somewhere

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with her mother. Muthavalli Sahib wiped his sweat; his throat was dry, in a dead voice he asked, "Where are you going...?"

"Where else...?" she sprang up. "I have given you ten children...I thought at least now let me get operated...."

He had no strength to stop her...He had no words to answer her...As Muthavalli Sahib was sitting lifeless...Ameena said exactly in his style: "Look....Close the door and look after the children....It would be more than a week when I come back."

Translated from Kannada by N.K. Rajalakshmi

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Deliverance

Veena Shantesvar

"Saroo! Eh Saroo! Get up now. It's hours past sunrise." He was waking up his wife in a voice soft with love.

Saroja mumbled her reluctance and pulled up the blanket tightly over herself. She didn't want to come out of the sweet dullness of the early morning sleep. He pushed the cover aside and planted a light kiss on her forehead. "Get up, darling, it's Monday today. We have to leave for work."

When she did not get up even after several kisses he gave up his efforts and said, "I know I sat up late in the night working on the accounts and must have disturbed your sleep. Okay, go on sleeping. I'll get the breakfast ready and call you."

Saroja's sleep was not that deep. She lay on the bed in comfort and listened to the sounds coming from the kitchen. Yes, he is frying the rava now... He is garnishing the *uppittu*. Boiling water for tea.... Searching for sugar in the boxes... Hasn't found it... The small box must be empty. There is some more in a bigger box kept in the cupboard. He will call me now to help him find it. No, he has continued his search. Doesn't want to disturb her sleep. Must have found it now. No surprise. All the things are stored in the kitchen itself, in boxes or bottles. One must have the patience to find them.

"Saroo darling! Breakfast is ready. Get up now at least, great woman!" He shouted from the kitchen. Yes, I must rise from the bed now. It will be late for me to go to the office otherwise. He too will be late for work."

☆ ☆ ☆

"Hi Saroo! Is it a long time since you returned from the Bank? Sorry, I couldn't make it earlier. Today is payday. The office was full of bustle.

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Everyone was eager to have his salary. I was held up till all the salaries were disbursed. It's Saturday today, half-working day, I had promised you that I would return early and take you to a matinee show. Very very sorry. He was asking for her forgiveness even when he was not guilty. He was feeling that it was wrong to make his wife wait and cause her disappointment.

It was his nature to make up for his lapses the moment they occurred. "Never mind. Don't be unhappy. We will have our meal and rest now and go to the cinema in the evening. Don't bother about cooking the evening meal. We will eat at Kamat's Hotel after the show. You like the Chinese dishes there, don't you?"

He knew cooking would be boring for me after we returned from the theatre or some other outing. It is normal for housewives to do their cooking even when they are tired or bored without complaining but he didn't want his wife to do that.

How well had he observed and studied all her likes! She was fond of Chinese dishes. She loved Begum Akhtar's gazals. White and light pink colours were her favourites. She delighted in roaming about in moonlight. And when it rained, in keeping to the warmth of the house enjoying tea with onion fry. She had a particular liking for light cotton saris and loved to bury her face on his chest when she slept. He knew them all and tried honestly to fulfil all her wishes, simple as they were.

"By the way, great woman, remove first the salary money from my shirt pocket and keep it safe. It is a lot of money, with bonus added. Must be more than ten thousand rupees. Just pay me for petrol expenses for my scooter. The rest is all yours. Spend it as you like."

He was a probationary officer to begin with. His salary was small. But he brought home all of it and put it in my hands. He is the senior most officer in his department now but does the same. I put it in a joint account along with my own earnings. He had never asked how much I earned, where I put it and what I did with it.

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"Saroo, just feed the baby and give him to me. I'll take care of him. You go to some other room and relax. It is just two months after your delivery. This prince of ours sleeps the whole day and keeps awake at night. You will be tired if you don't get good sleep at night. I'll be on duty during the nights till he grows up. Your health is all important." He had a dispassionate view of things. He didn't think that looking after

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children was exclusively the mother's duty. Since both husband and wife were responsible for the birth of a child, they both had the duty of bringing him up, especially when both were working, he argued. He thought it was wrong to use a phrase like Women and Child Welfare Department and insisted that the name should be changed to Parents and Child Welfare Department.

"Saroo, I'll give Raja his bath by the time you get the tiffin ready. Or if you like, you bathe him and I'll prepare the tiffin. The choice is yours..."

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"You have come back exhausted after your work at the bank. You don't have to do both the jobs — cooking and making the children do their homework. We will share them. On the days you do the cooking I'll take care of the children's homework. On the days you look after their homework I'll do the cooking."

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"Saroo, eh Saroo, come and sit with me on the terrace. Look, I have put up an easy chair for you with a cushion. Today is a full moon day. The moonlight is glorious. Let us forget all our cares and sit here for some time. When we sit here like this all our old memories come back to us, don't they. Do you remember how-in the early days after our marriage we used to spread our mattresses here and sleep in the moonlight?" He was a husband with wonderful tastes which he never lost.

"Our feelings for each other have remained so fresh even after years of marriage — like the light in your eyes. Haven't they?" No feelings remain fresh after years of marriage and no light survives in a wife's eyes. If my husband feels they are still alive he must be a man with a real heart.

☆ ☆ ☆

"Saroo, I have enjoyed all kinds of happiness and comfort, honour and status in my life, all the glory I wished for. But you are my most invaluable asset. You have given meaning to my life. I must have earned a lot of merit to get a wife like you. You have made me taste the nectar of life's happiness."

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How many wives have the good luck to hear such words of trust and fulfilment?

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Saroja is half awake and half asleep. She is lying alone in the large bed in the room. Others have remained outside, thinking she is asleep and not wishing to disturb her. They are speaking in soft voices. All kinds of people are there. Raja, the eldest son and his wife, the younger son, the daughter and the son-in-law, the neighbours, her colleagues in the bank, people who work in his office and several others. Hundreds of them but there is no noise. They are speaking in whispers.

"Raju, you are the eldest. You have to bear all the responsibility now. You must take good care of your mother. She will not be able to bear the shock without your help." Some elderly gentleman with concern.

"You are right, Uncle. That's why doctors have put Mummy under sedation. She hasn't yet come out of its effect." Raju's explanation in a low voice.

"What a great man he was. How many people did he help. He never said no to anyone. Like Harischandra he was. What tranquillity! He was never angry, never unjust to anyone." Praise from someone else.

Saroja is now fully awake. She hears people praising her husband, offering sympathies.

Yes. He is no more. He had a heart attack yesterday and died. It is now past nine in the morning. 'What have I been doing for the last twelve hours,' she asked herself.

Saroja tried to remember. He died exactly at ten minutes to ten. The doctor was by his side. "I am sorry, Madam" he said and called Raju. The daughter also came in, running. They had arrived the previous week after hearing that their father was in a serious condition. Day and night they had attended to him, had wept pathetically when they learnt he was dead. It was midnight by the time all this had happened. What was she herself doing at that time?

"Mummy has suffered a shock. That's why she doesn't speak or weep. Better to put her under sedation."

"Oh, Mummy."

Saroja remembers having heard all this. What happened later? Later she slowly slipped into the dreamworld.

Dreamworld?

Yes.

Was all this a dream then?

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Yes.

His preparing tea while she was still in bed, handing over to her his entire salary; promising to take care of the children during the nights; inviting her to the movie and the restaurant; offering to share the work in the house; speaking words of love in the moonlight; assuring her that she had brought him fulfilment in life?

Was all this a dream?

Yes.

What beautiful dreams! Dreams she had dreamt ever since she was a small girl. If these were just dreams it would have been better not to have woken up, she thought.

So I am awake now. Now I know how different dreams are from reality. I realise what I had seen and experienced all these hours were just dreams.

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He is dead now. The man who had married her, fathered three children, lived with her for thirty five years and left all her dreams unrealised for thirty-five years. He is dead. That is the reality.

Was nothing else real? No.

Reality was larger than dreams, several times more bitter, unbearable and cruel.

Saroja's mouth went dry. She wanted a hot cup of tea. But whom could she ask? Her husband's body was still lying stretched in the drawing room. People sat around it and cried rhythmically. To be fair to them this was the time for her too to cry, she should feel the sorrow more deeply than they, shouldn't she? But was there fairness in this country, in this society, that too for a woman? She had asked the question from several platforms in her public speeches, knowing fully well what the answer was.

She could see the dead body through the half open door. They had given him a bath and stuffed his nose with cotton. He was lying straight, as though he would get up and approach her and shout at her in his rough voice.

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"Eh, Saroja, come here. Can't you come when I call you? What if you are boiling milk on the gas stove? When I call you you should shut the gas and come. Do you understand? Didn't you receive your salary yesterday? Haven't I told you you should hand it over to me as soon as you get

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it? Yes. I drink, I gamble I shall do what I choose. Who are you to question me? Don't poke your nose in my affairs. Give me the money and shut your mouth."

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"I know Saroji, you are an officer in a bank. But that does not mean you have a license to flirt with anyone you like...He may be your colleague but your talk with him should be confined to work. You don't have to laugh and show your teeth. I made a mistake. Women who have double degrees and work are full of arrogance. I shouldn't have married a woman like you. If you can flirt with other men when I, your husband, am still alive, what all you could have done before marriage? Look here, remember what I am saying now. I'll break your teeth if I catch you laughing for nothing and talking to other men."

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"What did you say? We should go to a restaurant? The children say so? Tell them clearly. Food from outside is not good for health. Waste of money and damage to health. Let them eat what they want at home. What? You are too tired to cook today? If you are tired, ask the children to cook. Let them also learn. Cook just rice. You can eat it, with pickles and chutney powder. Eat a simple meal, as Gandhiji advises. I am having dinner at the club, and I'll be late coming home. Close the door."

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"Eh Saroji, are you alive or dead? Can't you hear the children quarrelling and crying? They are making such a noise. Take them away from here. Saturdays come once a week. I am trying to get some rest after lunch and these devils don't let me do so. What? They are adamant and don't listen to you? Whack them and shut them up in a dark room. Let them starve for a couple of days. Then they will know how to behave. What? You can't eat while they are starving? Starve with them if you like. Your health will improve. You are getting so fat these days."

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"Eh Saroji. Haven't you thought about cooking today? You have been sitting there in the terrace like a ghost for so long. What? There is moonlight

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there? How does it make a difference? You go mad after moonlight. Come full moon day and you behave like one possessed. That's the reason why you sit there with your eyes closed. I must find someone to drive away the spirits."

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"Give up this madness of buying new saris, cooking rich food and inviting people for parties for birthdays or some such silly occasions. There are plenty of saris in your stock. One shouldn't waste money like this. Four saris are enough for you, two for wearing at home and two for going out. New saris are not going to bring back your youth, you should know that. Look into the mirror. See how your eyes and cheeks are sunk... Did you say something about my spending money on beer and cigarettes? I am a man and I'll do whatever I like. I work the whole day and get tired. I do whatever I want for recreation. Don't meddle with my affairs."

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"What? You need money for Raju's fees? You get your salary. Pay out of that. Don't go on bothering me about books and clothes for children....What did you say? The milk bill is bigger this month because of the guests? You shouldn't have ordered more milk just because guests were there. Now onwards cut the milk expenses by half. Enough if I get my daily glass of milk. You may give Raju half a glass but your daughter can do without milk. Who will marry her if she gets fat? You shouldn't even touch the milk yourself. Don't you know that women who drink milk get diabetes?

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"Saroji, you may say anything but you educated women have delicate health. Of no use whatsoever. Just because you have had a touch of flu and suffered from fever for a week or so, it doesn't mean you should remain in bed all the time. Look at the women in the villages. How hard they work in the fields. They don't pay any attention to fever and the like. It won't be good for you if you go on lying in bed because of the so called weakness. Get up and do some cooking, you may wash my shirts and trousers and iron them. Don't go after tablets and other medicines. They have bad side effects. I am going on a trip for a few

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days to Jog, Gokarn and Murdeshvar with friends. Take care of the house."

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"Eh Saroji, where are you off to? Didn't I ask you to apply for leave and stay at home? Urgent work of submitting accounts, did you say? It can wait. Don't go today. I've told you I am not well. Go and get the doctor. Fever? No, I don't have fever yet but I may get it any time, perhaps tomorrow. It will be good for me to consult the doctor before that and take some medicine. Come press my legs and rub Vicks Vaporub on my forehead and cook some porridge for me and make hot water. Send that bloody leave letter to your office immediately. ...Ah! Oh! Amma! What are you doing with the thermometer? The temperature is normal? Silly! I told you I am anticipating fever. Go, get the doctor first."

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"But Saroji, why do you have to look depressed all the time? You have a husband who is highly placed in society, children settled in life, a large house, car, ornaments —in fact every thing. You should think you are fortunate to get a husband like me. Will you ever realise how much you are indebted to me?"

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"Mummy seems to be in a stuper," the daughter's voice coming from outside.

"How long can we keep the body like this? We must proceed to the next stage. Raju, go and bring your mother here, gently. Ask her to sit for a few minutes by the side of your father's body. We have to follow the prescribed procedure. Don't worry, we will shorten it." Sympathetic suggestion from an elder. "Oh God. How is Mummy going to bear all this." The grieving children.

"What can be done? His life span was over. He is one with God now. We are outsiders and yet we feel the loss so acutely. Poor lady. How must she be feeling? Her husband was God to her."'

"Anna, you go. Make your heart resolute and bring Mummy here." The daughter's weeping call.

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Saroji didn't need anyone to wake her up. She was fully conscious. She had come out of the world of dreams now and was living in the real one. She had a feeling of lightness in body and mind—a feeling of happiness born out of freedom. She was free from all the pain, all the humiliation, the violence, disappointments and injustice. A sense of escape from tyranny. She is aware that she is not in a state of grief and is not hurt by this awareness. If at all there was a feeling of sorrow and pain it was not because of her husband's dying but for the innumerable dreams of hers that he had killed.

Saroja shook her head and got up. She smoothened her hair and her sari and went alone to the kitchen. She took boiled milk from the cupboard, poured it into a glass, mixed it with sugar and drank it with relish. Then before her son could come in to fetch her, she walked towards the drawing room with bold and easy steps.

Translated from Kannada by G.S. Amur

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The Deceived

Manu Baligar

Dark clouds seemed to be engaged in a foreplay as they chased each other. As the wind increased they mingled with one another and as their union became intense the rays of the sun could not reach the earth. The mid-day had turned to night helping the nuptials of the heavens. The green earth looking forward for the king of rains seemed to be suffering the heat of separation. The little cracks on the earth opened themselves up in anticipation of the raindrops that were about to fall. The birds and animals, forgetting the scorching heat of the sun in the dark shadow of the gathering clouds, began to frolic in that atmosphere of anticipated rain. The leaves that had fallen on the roadside allowed themselves to be swept by the cool wind and now it seemed that a red carpet was spread to welcome the rain king.

The union of the clouds above and the invitation of the expanding cracks below had made the whole sky moist. Very soon the clean-washed trees began to sway and show their joyance, the heated earth received the coolness of the rain within and began to give out a thin vapour of satisfaction.

Each year Maddeppa used to describe these vapours of satisfaction that the earth emitted at the first rains of the year as 'fragrance of the earth'. He usually felt a thrill at the very anticipation of this fragrance. But, today, he is sitting alone in his dark room gazing blankly at nothingness. His right hand is embracing a two feet idol of an elephant carved in rosewood. Now and then, without altering his gaze, he is softly kissing the idol.

Maddeppa was teaching in a junior college at Lakshmeshwara. Maddeppa Durugappa Kompi was his full name. There is a reason for mentioning it now. He had developed a dislike, an intense hatred towards his name. It is difficult to tell how much hurt he had suffered because

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of his name. His enthusiasm is bound to burst the moment someone calls his name and he feels a peculiar burning within himself. Sometimes the mischievous boys play games with his name. One day they had written *Hullu Maddi Halu Kompe* on the blackboard. He could not continue the lesson that day and had left the class. He had often thought of changing his name. When he came to know that he has to make an affidavit and advertise in local papers in order to change his name he gave up the idea of changing his name as it would lead to further embarrassment.

Life is a bed of thorns for the sensitive and for a person like Maddeppa who was over-sensitive even little obstacles of life were extremely shocking.

With deafening thunder, blinding flashes and heavy downpour the king rain rushed to satisfy the eagerly waiting earth.

People had begun to throw axes and other iron tools into their yards. It was their belief that the iron would absorb the thunderbolt and their eldest children are protected from harm. Maddeppa, who had written a poem on the rainy season remembering the famous lines– (The hills are *sthavara* Linga, the rain is the ritual bath, look at the gathering clouds...)—was now sitting passive, immobile like a boulder.

Does it take long for the news to spread in a small town like Lakshmeshwara? As Maddeppa had not gone to the college for two days, some said he is taken in by the devil-wind, and a few others said he has become nutty. He must be taken to Dudh Peera's Dargah, he must be taken to have a bath at the Agasthya Teertha, he must be taken to Mukti Mandira—they offered their own remedies. A few even said that Maddeppa had gone crazy and must be taken to the mental hospital at Dharwad. The rain stopped after some vehement ejaculations. The sky began to shine bright. Light enveloped the hitherto dark earth. The rays of the sun entered the house and filled it with light. Yet there was no end to the darkness in the mind of Maddeppa. He was never so inactive as this. He was ambitious and though born in a little hut but had wanted to rule the whole earth from a palace. He had a hundred colourful dreams. He had always tried carefully to project himself.

Maddeppa was born into a very backward, poor family in a little village near Lakshmeshwara. His parents were illiterate and were labourers in other people's fields. They sent Maddeppa to school and as he was bright he completed his seventh standard exams. He easily got admission in Shigli High School and Free Boarding. He was happy that he could have two square meals a day and that he needed not go starving every alternate day as he used to at home. He developed an attachment towards the tiled roof of Shigli Boarding School as if it was his home. The

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thatched hut in his village offered no protection from rain and his family had to take shelter in the cowshed of Gowda. Now he had a roof over his head and when he came to know that food was provided in the Boarding School even during vacation he stopped going to his village. When he developed a friendship with Shivalingu, the son of School committee Chairman, he was happy as if he held the sky in his palms. During the season of harvest Maddeppa loved to stroll with Shivalingu through all the fields that belonged to the Chairman. The boys invented one excuse or the other to visit the fields every day. As they sat by the side of the haystack and ate groundnuts Maddeppa wished all the twelve months of the year to be the season of harvest. The three years of his stay at the high school seemed to get over in just three days. Maddeppa finished his matriculation exam with a first class.

Maddeppa got admission in Jabin College at Hubli. But as the college offered no free boarding, he joined *Andaneswara Uchita Prasadu Nilayu* at Naregal and continued his education there. He was happy that his friend Shivalingu got admission in Karnataka College and college hostel at Dharwad. But he felt a hurt chop within himself that he could not study at Dharwad. Sometimes Maddeppa remembered all this as he ate his food. Then the image of cow's urine sprinkling over his food as he sat in the cowshed of Gowda in his village returned to his mind. He could not eat and the food, *rotti* and hot *dhal*, seemed to choke his breath. The hot *dhal* seemed to burn his eyes and he shed tears. If only I had got all the facilities that Shivalingu had got I would have got first rank in all the exams—thought Maddeppa. The peacock of his desires seemed to spread its feathers and dance. Somehow Maddeppa suppressed his desires and finished his graduation with a first class.

Upto that point there were not many obstacles in the path of Maddeppa. Somehow he could overcome the little problems of life. Once he completed his bachelor's degree he was like a plain-land kid standing before the Himalayas. What should he do next? There was not enough money for postgraduate studies. His parents had grown old and could hardly work. It was inevitable that Maddeppa should do something for his livelihood.

Then began the search for a job. Maddeppa began to feel the cruelty and harshness of life. Man can face anything, but not poverty; he realised the bitter truth. The cruelty of actual life far exceeded descriptions of it in fiction. On many nights he went to bed his belly filled merely with just cups of water. Hunger on the one hand and the loss of pride on the other —Maddeppa suffered hell. Why should God create men like me if we are to suffer like this—Maddeppa thought. His friend Shivalingu continued his higher studies at Dharwad. I am not so kicky,

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he thought. Necessity is the mother of invention, extreme necessity is the mother of recklessness. Though Maddeppa was from a backward class somehow he got a certificate that he belonged to a scheduled tribe. All that he wanted was to get a job. He studied hard and completed the Bank exams. He got the job of a bank clerk at Hubli. Now Maddeppa was climbing the steps to heaven. But within the next six months it was discovered that he had given a fake certificate and a case was filed against him. Soon he was to be dismissed from his post and sensing that he resigned from his job.

Maddeppa lost his job. But for a heart with several wounds one more scar was not really unbearable. As he had deliberately got a false certificate his mind was rather prepared for this eventuality. In the meanwhile another incident had happened and that provided a relief to his mind and offered him a new hope. That is, as soon as he had got a bank job some of his relatives had arranged for his marriage with the daughter of an ex-MLA. Twice or thrice he had gone to Shiggav and talked with his would be wife. Though you have lost your *nokri* (job) you have your *chokri* (girl)—his friends had teased him. Maddeppa was nursing his wounds in the hope of a happy married life.

Does not God always dispose off the hopes of man? The girl's family began to murmur, 'how can we give our child to a jobless person?' This flame of rejection began to burn Maddeppa. He had to face the great shock of life. The earth on which he stood began to burn like embers. The blowing wind became poisonous arrows and made fresh wounds on his heart. He could no longer bear this pain and he seethed and writhed. God, as usual, was keeping quiet. Maddeppa decided to end his life soon.

And yet he felt like having a change of place for the time being. Where can he go? He remembered his only friend, Shivalingu. Shivalingu was now an Assistant Commissioner at Mysore. He had successfully completed the competitive exams and had got a direct appointment. Maddeppa carried all his tumult and shattered dreams with him as he went to Mysore to see his friend.

Wounds, disappointments, the blows deivered by a series of unbearable accidents to the gentle mind had made Maddeppa's each breath a sigh. All the opportunities that came his way only further deceived him. The fruits of his efforts always eluded him. He was like a thirsty hunter chasing a mirage. He had gone to his friend as the last hope of his life.

Maddeppa felt both joy and extreme pain as he looked at Shivalingu's bungalow, his car with a red dome light, his army of servants. If one is to be born one should be born like Shivalingu, a son of rich parents;

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my life is meaningless, worthless—Maddeppa thought. That was the time of Dassera in Mysore. Shivalingu had the responsibility of organizing different functions. He had to make seating arrangements at the palace, special arrangements for VIPs, look after the guest houses, and make arrangements for transport and what not. He seemed inevitable for anything to happen. *Tahasildars* of four *taluks*, BDOs, engineers and hundreds of officials always waited for his orders. One should live like this, and what about me? I am a useless creature, unwanted even by God, Maddeppa thought It was almost impossible for him to suppress the tumult in his heart. Somehow he succeeded in hiding the flames of his jealousy and putting on the mask of friendly smile.

On the final day of Dassera the Chief Minister came and offered worship to the idol of Bhuvaneshwari. The idol was then placed in the god-cradle on the back of the elephant Drona. It is said that the King of Mysore himself sat on the elephant in the olden days. What a grandeur! Maddeppa who was sitting in the front row reserved for the VIPs got excited. His mind was like mercury that, fallen on the earth, is shattered to pieces and moves hither and thither. Each piece of his mind seemed to have an existence of its own. His body appeared to grow wings. Soon Maddeppa was flying over the palace. He was not satisfied. He descended directly on to the gold cradle. The elephant Drona became the Iruvatha of Indra. It began to bow to Maddeppa with all its five trunks. Maddeppa travelled to Indraloka. Now he has all the pelf and pleasures of gods. With a divine majesty he returned to the earth. He had accomplished what the King of Mysore could not do. He ordered the elephant to go straight to the market street. The elephant obeyed. Maddeppa soon got up from his chair and made his way into the crowd. He stepped into a toy centre he had seen the other day. He examined all the toy elephants there and asked for an Iravatha. The shopkeeper said, 'no.' Maddeppa pitied him thinking that the poor fellow did not know the significance of Iravatha. Finally he chose the biggest elephant toy that was there and paid almost all the money he had. That night, without even informing Shivalingu, Maddeppa returned to Lakshmeshwara.

Maddeppa sat in his room embracing the toy elephant. His desires that had climbed on to the gold-cradle on the elephant back have stayed there and refused to land. The gaze fixed on nothingness declines to look at anything.

Translated from Kannada by O.L. Nagabhushana Swamy

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Mother Goddess and the Son of Jungles

Savitha Srinivasa

Both were carrying a headload of twigs gently balanced on their heads and walked towards their small wooden dwelling on the slope of the mountain. It was the time of evening dusk.

Two canines lying down lazily sprang up suddenly in enthusiasm on spotting the familiar couple. Waging their tails, they ran about their front and back. The couple placed the twigs in a shed attached to the house and locked themselves inside the house. The next time they were out was only when the morning sun would wear its full form and its rays tapped their door. Again, like a routine, they would gaze at the sky with the hope of getting atleast a glimpse of the clouds.

Even as the ground opened its mouth yearning for water, the woman helplessly sighed, wiped the sweat formed on her forehead due to the sun's heat and called her man for lunch.

Though by their intimacy, it was evident that she was his better half, the awareness of their age and tiredness did not seem to have taken its toll on them. The lines on their faces deepened with the ripening of age. Even while it gave the clue of their age, by the absence of young ones there was no occasion to compare as there wasn't a yardstick. As the years rolled by, a tight bond had developed as if the two could not leave the company of either and led a life in the tiny dwelling enclosed in a shell.

At one side of the wall, drawing a line had become a daily activity. When the complete wall was filled with these small lines, Mylarappa and Kuveramma widened their eyes in amazement and wondered how time had flown past after they came to this remote area.

Mylarappa looked at his partner and remembering something, brought a dried grass stick and giggled holding it near her stripes of gray hair. She plucked the stick, making a face at him and leaned to

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the wall. But all of a sudden, her face had turned pale as if some incident that occurred long back had bombarded her brain. Even Mylarappa was scared at the sudden change and slowly he too wore a sore face and sat on the ground, participating in her sorrow.

It was rare she shed tears. As the incidents that occurred sometime back flashed back in her memory, it would take quite a few days to extinguish her sorrow.

"Munela... Munela..." When she spent the night muttering, Mylarappa not knowing how to console her, would join her in shedding tears. The redness of their eyes was sadly reflected by the setting sun.

Munela was none other than their own son whom they lost when he was still a four-year-old kid. Anxious of where he might be and how he had kept worrying them from that very day. In search of him, they crossed the forests and mountains like nomads and in the spot where their tired legs were transfixed, a small residence took its birth. Their green fingers had transformed the whole barren land into a fertile one and the trees and plants bore ample fruits. Though they were not fortunate to have any children in future, they filled their eyes with hope at the sight of the trees bearing fruits.

That day, the hard reality that with the absence of their future generation, their existence too might be lost had squeezed their hearts. Many a time, they had thought of returning back to where they came from and lead their life amongst their native people. However, the loss of the their son and their barren life had left many a bad mouth speak ill, imprinting sore thoughts in their minds.

The sky outside had joined them in shedding tears. Lightning and thunder roared as if slitting the earth apart. They wondered if a hole was formed in the sky and water kept pouring out in showers! Many months might have rolled on since they witnessed such heavy rains. But even this rain had failed to cool their burnt bodies.

As one watched, their tears had found the way outside through the hole in the door and mixed with the rain water to form a pool. It might have been a rule laid by nature that she as a mother found her child in him. The night was spent consoling each other. By the time the rays of light was traced, the field outside was half-destroyed and the other half had left strong roots to face the assailing rain and was now shining with greenery.

"It might take at least some 5-6 days to set right things," calculating, they started work and noticing the pool in front of their house, they saluted with folded hands and thanked the grace of the Rain God.

Thinking of using in the field the water from the pool, they

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immediately set to drive canals in the form of small bunds. When the rains failed, the water from the pool itself was *Sanjeevini** to the fields.

Few months might have passed. Once when Mylarappa was feeding the dogs like on any other day, he noticed some objects moving on the hillock far away. It seemed as if the objects were coming out from the horizon. Awestruck, he viewed the beings come nearer and nearer with his eyes and mouth wide open. Overjoyed at meeting human beings after many years, Mylarappa greeted them open-heartedly. They were trying to communicate in some other language and pointed out by gestures that they had come this way intent on making a living. Happy that they had received hospitality in a distant region, they joined the couple in the small dwelling.

The five strangers who arrived there appeared like Godmen and Kuveramma served them amply with fruits and eatables. The conversation continued with gestures, interspersed with words from their own language. Later the two couples and the young boy took rest after having travelled for long distances.

As the days rolled by, there appeared no signs of the visitors leaving and, close to the small house there arose another dwelling . . . and another beside it.

"There you are . . . here we are," conversing amongst themselves, the couples had entered the new nests and warmed them up. Even though the Mylarappa couple were pleased that they had got neighbours, it was irritating to note them depending on their fields to meet their food requirements.

* * *

Night had thrown its covers. When the light was snuffed out and when darkness had cast its shadow, the two came out of their home and till the moon set, were engrossed in fencing their house and their fields. The sun rose in the morning and had laughed in amusement. It was the first spectator to their activity and surprised at the work done secretly, it seemed to be travelling to know 'what next' and curiously view the development that the next day might unveil.

The boy next door was a naughty one, most of the time playing pranks. Already, he had gained friendship with the dogs. That day, as usual, when he came out of his house to play with them, what lay in store for them there? Immediately, he woke up his parents and brought them out.

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* Sanjeevani: Life saving herb

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The only thing his parents could do was gape and blink at each other. The hard truth that they had to find an outlet for earning their own bread and butter if they had to survive had flashed to them. As per the notion that necessity is the mother of invention, the two couples started tilling the barren land in front of their house.

Like gold under the cover of the ground, the whole land shed its barren sheet and sprouted greenery. Only for water did they have to depend on Mylarappa's pond, for which they connected canals to the field.

In the midst of these developments, the couples further gave birth to 5-6 young ones and seasons rolled on to witness marital ties amongst them. This further gave rise to many more houses in the area. Mylarappa and Kuveramma were overtaken by time and were buried in the very land they tilled. The whole region came to be known as "Mylaralli.' The sun beamed a satisfactory smile, viewing the rapid growth in the area.

* * *

The Mylaralli village people were unaware of how 'he' had come to their place. On one unfortunate day, his legs had pulled him to the place and he fell fast asleep on the stone platform under the Peepul tree, placing his palm as support to his head. Suddenly, there seemed to be an attack of stones on his body and he woke up startled, to face the onlookers. His body had already sustained several wounds that had swelled out and eaten his skin. On the already deformed body, the pelting of stones was aimed to further disfigure him.

"Ayo..." Unable to tolerate the torment he screamed in pain. By the time people from neighbouring houses came out to find out what was going on, the stranger had gathered the stones thrown at him and thrown them back at the persons who threw them. The mischief mongers took to their heels and slowed down at a distance to look back at him. Their provocative rebuke continued.

"Mad man... jungle man..."

"Certainly he must have come from the jungles to this place. Otherwise would he remain mute not tending to his wounds..."

Whisperings were heard at the sides.

The enraged stranger, with only a piece of cloth on his waist, went chasing them. The troublesome boys took a few steps backwards and had started running again.

"What guts these people must be having to harass me instead of leaving me alone...Which way did those boys go..." Wondering thus,

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he searched for the ones who disappeared in a whisk. Based on his guesses, he went in search of them in the nooks and corners.

The news that he had come to the village spread like wildfire in the entire village and people had gathered in huge numbers to have a glimpse of him.

He shrunk his eyes and looked keenly at them. Long back, he had watched these people from a distance. Though a desire arose to mingle with those creatures that resembled him with two hands and legs, he was scared, moreover hesitant as to how they might accept him and had silently vanished between the trees. The language they spoke seemed complex and incomprehensible, unlike the language communicated by the animals in the woods, which seemed to be much more meaningful. It was during the night while walking in the jungle, that his legs had accidentally treaded the route towards this village. Now, musing how he could escape from the crowd watching him as if he were a strange animal, he cast a sweeping glance at the people who surrounded him like a maze.

In a split second, he suddenly brushed past them and ran. After running for a distance, he slowed down. With great difficulty, he pulled his legs and walked, literally hopping and came across a dam. Like the huge walls of the dam obstructing the water in the lake, he felt his pain and grief were also suppressed. Washing his face, hands and legs with the lake water, he felt freshened. The water that quenched his thirst had also cooled the burning stomach and it was indeed ambrosia to the hungry man.

By then, two men had approached him from behind and chained him. Even as he tried to break free, it was a futile effort and he had to merely walk in the direction they pulled. Before him, four to five men were seated on the stone platform of a tree and seemed to be waiting for his arrival.

As soon as he was brought, they had commenced shooting arrows of questions. 'From which path did you come . . . Which is your place . . .'As they rinsed his past history, they could only extract 'Ba . . . ba . . . ba . . .' blabbering as reply. Examining the unhealed wounds on his body, the uncombed hair, the long beard and moustache, which was left to grow without shaving, the elders seated in the Panchayat engaged in discussion amongst themselves. The tongue twisting in their mouth appeared as a whirling poisonous snake to the stranger.

"What if we tie him outside the village . . . Should we take him back to the forest... He must be right person to till our fields . . ." In one corner of their minds, it was clear that there was inhibition to include him with them, since his disease might infect them, or he may even attack them.

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At the end, the people placed the responsibility of the stranger on one of the Panchayat members and left the place relieved.

* * *

The stranger was not fortunate enough to get away from the fetters that clung to his body. One day he was taken to till the field replacing the oxen. He had a miserable time wherein before the wounds on his body could heal, there was yet another burden on his shoulder. The new master would never forget to tie him to a tree at the advent of evening.

He yearned in his own language, 'Give me something to feed upon, give me a piece of bread . . . Please don't delay . . . my stomach would not listen.' Only thing was his tongue had not been tuned to the feelings. The residents in the house used to remember him while feeding the watchdogs and gave him something to munch upon.

While his strength was draining out, the house owner had put on weight and swelled like a bull. The tree branches became the dwelling for this stranger. From there the scenes far off were visible and did away with his loneliness. He was a silent spectator to the ongoings in his master's house, watching through his house window, seated on the tree branch.

Already he was familiar with his master's wife. Once he spotted his master having a relationship with some other woman in his wife's absence. The stranger had watched with curiosity through the window and started breaking his head over the matter.

The days jumped like the golden deer. One morning, his master freed himself from the embrace of his mistress and went to the backyard to attend nature's call. He tied the rope to the metal vessel and lowered it into the well through the pulley to draw water from the well and watched it go down.

When the vessel was nearing the water, his gaze accidentally fell on the reflection in water. Surprised and shocked at what he saw, he looked at his side, not believing his eyes. Realising that it couldn't be any other person than himself, he rushed into the house and examined his face in the mirror. Yes. It was his own reflection.

The teeth had projected forward, the ears broadened and the eyebrows, moustache had thickened. This growth on the already rough face appeared frightening and easily capable of inculcating fear in the onlookers.

His mistress who came in search of him was also unable to recognise him. Oblivious that her secret entry into the house might be exposed,

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she raised a hue and cry. Within minutes, the entire village had flocked at the place to witness the developments. Only when the master opened his mouth to speak out, was his identity known.

His wife who had gone to her mother's place for a few days had come rushing home on hearing about the incident. On one side, her husband's frightening features evoked sorrow, as well as fear, while on the other side, his illegal relationship with another woman had triggered wrath.

The villagers had started reviewing the reasons for this strange growth. Rumours about gods, evil ghosts at play were flying high. Just when the dark shadow of the fate of the master was still raw, same sort of growth was seen among the other elders who headed the village Panchayat. Now the incident took a serious turn and people talked about an unknown hand behind the events. Even though the prayers, religious vows were being conducted more than ever before in the temples, there were no signs of improvement in the situation and the whole village could only watch the changes spread to the other villagers slowly.

For once, a villager suddenly remembered the entry of that man to their village and planted a seed of suspicion—'He is the one responsible for all this din.' The scene of the stranger drinking water from Mylaralli lake when he first came to the village was still fresh in their memory. By washing his body in that lake, he had literally dirtied the water. They came to the unanimous conclusion that his disease might have infected the villagers drinking the lake water. The seed of suspicion grew in the nerves and blood vessels of the people and like a tree, it bore fruit in their brain.

'An end has to be brought to the jungle man.' They concluded their discussion that night were all set to bring their decision into action the next day. Though these happenings were beyond the comprehension of the stranger, he could sense the smell of some ill-fate in store for him. Dreading the worst, it was indeed intolerable to sit on the tree, chained. The jungle man climbed on top of the tree to which he was chained and started howling like the jungle wolves.

Working on par with oxen, his bones would have broken if someone else were in his position. The pieces of bread thrown by the master had failed to quench his hunger and the burning sensation was beyond endurance. His piercing cry echoed on the walls of Mylaralli houses. The waves of its echo had even touched the wall of the dam, to lend a crack that increased in proportion in no time. The agonizing scream appeared strange and as a sign of some bad omen, hearing which the people had come running out of their houses in a matter of seconds.

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Village men fast asleep in the sweet embrace of their wives were suddenly shaken and rushed out tracing the voice in the very clothes there were on. Amidst the whispers, discussions on 'what happened' were doing the rounds.

Meanwhile, the master who held the stranger captive had started showering abuse on him. As his curses flowed unhindered, more audible was the wailing of the stranger. His master tried to block the unbearable moaning by closing his ears and searched for the cane reserved to beat the dogs.

In barely a few seconds, the waves of water from the dam rushed in ferociously, washing away the house and carrying his master along its course. The stranger sitting on the tree could only watch the mishap occur suddenly before him, with his mouth wide open.

The Mylaralli lake water had taken a huge form and was gobbling up the objects coming in its way like a whale. Even strong houses were unable to withstand the ferocity with which the waves pulled them along with the currents, irrespectively resembling sea waves rather than a lake. People and animals caught in its long shoulders were jointly floating and drowning in the wavy motion.

The ones unable to swim were making a futile effort to float by moving their hands and legs in an amateur way. To their despair, snakes had accompanied the lot. The sight of the vastness of water created an illusion as if its gigantic form was roaring and yearning - 'Munela . . . Munela . . .'

Clutching to a branch of a tree located on a raised ground, he watched the calamity for quite a long time and slowly felt his eyes droop with tiredness.

The whole village was immersed in water for nearly three days and when the sun shone in the horizon, the water had started to evaporate gradually, exposing the mounds that appeared like islands.

The stranger had now started mustering up courage. The chains clung to him broke along with the tree trunk to which he was tied. After he made a survey of the whole area, there seemed to be no sign of any living beings. Human bodies and carcasses lay scattered everywhere. By now, his stomach had started making its presence felt. He treaded the path to the jungle, leaving behind the once inhabited land in search of food.

Translated from Kannada by the Author

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Kanakadasa: The Golden Servant

Basavaraj Naikar

India is known as a land of many religions. The man-God relationship happens to be the central concerns of all religions. There are three ways of worshipping God in Hinduism, i.e. Path of Knowledge (*Jnanamarga*), Path of Devotion (*Bhaktimarga*) and Path of Action (*Karmamarga*). All these three ways have been pursued by various people in India all through history. The Path of Devotion is characterized by a deep emotional attachment to God and unshakable faith in Him. It is, therefore, contradistinguished from the highly intellectual approach of *Jnanamarga* or the action-oriented approach of *Karmamarga*.

The Path of Devotion (*Bhaktimarga*) in India has been as ancient as the *Vedas* and the *Upanisads* and expresses itself in the hymns composed by monks and seers. Later it bifurcated into devotion to Siva and devotion to Vishnu and articulated in the *tevaras* of Nayanmars and *tiruvaymolis* of Alwars of the Tamil region. Andal is one of the Alwars, who composed poems depicting the devotion of *gopikas* to Srikrishna. The ninth and tenth centuries were known as the Age of Devotional Literature. The Tamil saint-poets were inspired by the description of gods and divine incarnations found in the *Vedas* and *Upanisads*. Sri Ramanuja, who was inspired by such sources, gave prominence to the element of devotion in his philosophy of Qualified Monism (*Visistadvaita*). His contemporary Sri Ramananda is said to have started a devotional movement in North India. Kabir, who was deeply influenced by Sri Ramananda became a worshipper of *Nirguna Brahma* and condemned icon-worship and considered pilgrimage as meaningless.

In the sixteenth century Tulsidas was influenced by Ramananda's instruction, became a worshipper of *Saguna Brahma* and composed his famous *Ramacharita Manasa*. Later the tradition of devotional literature was continued by Mirabai and Surdas. Narasimha Mehta was the founder

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of devotional literature in Gujarat. Sripati Pandita, Mallikarjuna Pandita, Sivalenkamanea, Palkurike Somanatha, Krishnamacharya and Potana were famous devotional writers in Telugu from Andhra Pradesh. Cherussheri and Ezhuttachchan were well-known devotional writers in Malayalam. Lal Ded (or Lalleswari) in Kashmiri, Gurunanak in Punjabi, Chandidas, Chaitanya and Jayadeva in Bengali, Sankaradeva in Assamese are known for their significant contribution to devotional literature in their respective languages.

In Karnataka, there was a rich harvest of devotional literature, especially *vachana* poetry in the twelfth century produced by the *saranas* (male saints) and *saranes* (female saints) belonging in various strata of society. Basaveswara, Allamaprabhu, Siddharama, Ambigara Caudayya, Madivala Macideva, Akkamahadevi, Sule Sankavve, etc. are the famous Virasaiva (or Lingayat) saints, who discussed their mystic experiences in the *Anubhava Mantapa* (Mystic Academy), and codified them in the form of *vachanas* (poetic utterances).

The *Haridasa* Movement of sixteenth century owes much to the *Sarana* Movement of the twelfth century Karnataka. The element of devotion (or faith) is common to both the groups though their gods were different from each other. Whereas *saranas* were devotees of Lord Siva, the *dasas* were devotees of Lord Hari.

The *Haridasas* comprised two categories: one, *Vyasa-Kuta* and two, *Dasa-Kuta*. The followers of *Vyasa-Kuta* were learned in the Vedic, Upanisadic and mystical lore about Lord Visnu and his various manifestations and taught their doctrines in the medium of Sanskrit. On the contrary the followers of *Dasa-Kuta* synthesized all the elements of the Vedic lore and tried to communicate them to the masses in simple regional languages like Prakrit and Kannada. There is no doctrinal difference between the two groups. Both of them accepted the dualistic philosophy (*Dwaita Siddhanta*) of Madhvacharya. A striking difference between the two happens to be that whereas *Vyasa-Kuta* was knowledge-oriented, *Dasa-Kuta* was devotion-oriented. But both the groups used the *kirtana* (popular discourse) form to communicate the message of dualistic philosophy and devotion to Lord Visnu. Sripadaraya, Vyasaraja, Vadiraja and Sri Raghavendra belonged to *Vyasa-Kuta*, whereas Purandaradasa, Vijayadasa, Gopaladasa, Jagannathadasa and Kanakadasa belonged to *Dasa-Kuta*.

Timmappa was the son of Biregouda and Bachchamma of the shepherd (*kuruba*) caste, who lived in Bankapura (a taluka in the present Haveri district), an administrative division of Vijayanagara Empire. The baby was born on Thursday of Kartika Bahula Tadige of Anandanamia Samvatsara (1486) and was named after Lord Timmappa of Titupati,

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as he was born from the grace of the Lord of Seven Hills. As a child, Timmappa happened to be very active. As a boy he took interest in drum-playing, which was the professional art of the *kurubas*. Biregouda happened to be the administrator of Bankapura. Srinivasacharya, a Sanskrit scholar of Bankapura accepted Timmappa as his disciple and instructed him in poetry, prosody, drama, grammar, rhetoric, mythology, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata*. As Timmappa was a precocious boy, he showed remarkable progress in learning and surprised his own guru. After Timmappa's completion of his academic education, his father arranged for his military education. Timmappa completed that also successfully. By the same time his religious bent of mind was awakened. He began to take a deep interest in *bhajan*-singing and meditating upon various manifestations of God.

At that time Timmappa's father Biregouda died rather unexpectedly leaving him a forlorn. Then Biregouda's arch-enemy Mallanayaka rushed to the Emperor of Vijayanagara, carried tales against the late Biregouda and succeeded in being appointed as the administrator of seventy-eight villages of Bankapura division. Reduced to dire poverty, Timmappa and his widowed mother left Bada village for Kaginele village and lived there with their kith and kin.

As a boy of about sixteen, Timmappa used to sing devotional songs, act the roles of mythological heroes in *yakshaganas* and arrange puppet-plays in addition to his routine duty of tending sheep and goats. One day when he was digging the farmland in his village, he chanced upon a few pots filled with gold coins hidden in the earth. Instead of using that money for selfish ends he spent it for ameliorative purposes like distribution of food to the poor, religious festivals, repair of dilapidated temples and so on. The people, who observed his non-possessive nature, considered him as a great donor and began to call him 'Kanakappa' or 'Kanakaraj' meaning a man of gold. Then onwards Timmappa came to be known as Kanakappa.

As Kanakappa was growing very popular, Mallanayaka, the arch-enemy of his father, felt deep stings of jealousy and attacked Kanakappa with a gang of his followers and mortally wounded him. This traumatic experience gave a new turn to Kanakappa's life. His spiritual orientation became stronger as a result of which he composed his famous poem, *Hari Bhakti Sara* (Essence of Devotion to Hari). As his reputation grew in the society, he was invited by the Emperor Sri Krishnadevaraya and appointed as an Administrator of Bada and Bankapura villages. Then onwards he came to be known as Kanakanayaka. Being deeply influenced by the glory and grandeur of Sri Krishnadevaraya, Kanakanayaka decided

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to compose his famous narrative *Mohana Tarangini* (*Ocean of Beauty*). As an administrator, Kanakanayaka carried out a number of welfare activities in his area and earned the love of the people. In the meanwhile, Laxmidevi (or Lakkamma), daughter of Mallanayaka, wanted to marry Kanakanayaka but she was not allowed by her father to do so. Hence Lakkamma took a bold decision to become a *sanyasini* all through her life. Kanakanayaka married another lady, Laxmidevi from a respectable family and got a son called Biranayaka. But when Kanakanayaka was at the height of his power, some unexpected tragedy happened in his life. His beloved wife and baby-boy died suddenly. Obviously, Kanakanayaka was disconcerted by the tragic death of his wife and baby. He refused to yield to his mother's pressure for a second marriage. Meanwhile, Mallanayaka, the arch-enemy of Kanakanayaka was sharpening his dagger secretly against him. Owing to the disintegration of the Vijayanagara Empire after the death of Sri Krishnadevaraya, Kanakanayaka lost his position as the Administrator of Bada and Bankapura villages. Then he had repeated dreams in which Lord Tirumalesa suggested to him to become his *dasa* (slave or servant). This dream coincided with some bitter experience that he had in his life. Once when he was fighting with the neighbouring people in defence of his own village Kaginele, he was mortally wounded. All these events brought in a radical change in his attitude to life. He had a vision of God, which inspired him to become an ascetic. Thus Kanakanayaka was transformed into Kanakadasa, the golden servant of Lord Hari. The change of identity could be seen in his change of dress from civilian to religious. He clad himself in a *dhoti* up to his knees, a black woolen blanket upon his left shoulder, a turban on his head and a pair of slippers on his feet. He slung a mono-stringed instrument called *ekdari* on his right shoulder, a basket from his left shoulder and held a pair of castanets in his left fingers. Having sought his mother's permission he went on visiting a few places of pilgrimage. Surprised by the sight of his new appearance, people asked him for the cause of this change. He replied to them plainly. "So far I served the human world as much as I could. Now onwards I shall be a servant of God and spend the rest of my life in the service of God." Then he visited Tirupati and had a *darsan* of Lord Venkateswara. Mystically directed by the Lord of Seven Hills, Kanakadasa returned to Bada and found that his mother was already dead. He, therefore, rushed to his mother's grave and prayed. Then he carried the heavy icon of Lord Adikesava from Bada to Kaginele, where he established it and got a temple built. Kanakadasa settled down at Kaginele and dedicated himself entirely to religious activities.

Inspired by a quest for higher spiritual knowledge, Kanakadasa

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approached Sri Vyasaraya Swami of Sosale Monastery at Tiruma-Kudalu, won his affection and blessings and achieved a remarkable success in spiritual pursuit. Then he revisited Tirupati and wrought many miraculous deeds there. Then he visited Nanjanagudu, Beluru, Udupi and other places of pilgrimage and educated people in morals. In his old age he settled at Kaginele. Lakkamma, the sanyasini had also grown old by now. She sought Kanakadasa's blessings. Kanakadasa advised her to consider everything in the world as God's *prasada* and keep doing her duty as a mendicant and take care of the temple of Lord Adikesava. After a few years, Kanakadasa left his mortal body and merged with Lord Adikesava. There is a critical controversy about the date of Kanakadasa's death, which oscillates between 1563 and 1606. The Kannada scholars have to decide the exact year of his death by studying the relevant documents and cultural texts.

* * *

During his long spiritual career, Kanakadasa composed many religious narratives, *Kirtanas* and *mundiges* glorifying the grandeur of Lord Hari and pleading for the human need to believe in Him. *Mohana Tarangini* (*Ocean of Beauty*) happens to be his first poetic narrative composed in Middle-Kannada and addressed to his wife. It is a very popular mythological epic dealing with the life of Sri Krishna and suffused with erotic sentiment (*sringara rasa*). A Vaishnava by faith, Kanakadasa has celebrated the grandeur and greatness of Sri Krishna in this poem in *sangatva* metre. The poem recreates the mythical story of the life of Sri Krishna and highlights the major events in his life— like the birth of Pradyumna to Rukmini, the theft of baby Pradyumna by a demon Sambarasura; the burning of Kama by Lord Siva; the fight between Pradyumna and Sambarasura at the instigation of Narada; the destruction of the demon Sambarasura; the remarriage between Kama and Rati; the marriage between Aniruddha (Sri Krisna's grandson) and Usha (daughter of demon Banasura, an ardent devotee of Lord Siva) and Sri Krishna's happy return to Dwaraka.

The theme of *Mohana Tarangini* is based on many mythological sources like the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Skanda Purana*, the *Harivamsa* and *Vishnu Purana*. Kankadasa has assimilated the source material so well and articulated it so beautifully in poetic form that no discerning reader can fail to enjoy it. The epic is known for its narrative skill, mellifluousness of language, abundance of descriptive element, colloquial style and marvellous sentiment.

Kanakadasa has exhibited his originality in the articulation of the

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mythological theme. He has followed the traditional poetic conventions like 'eighteen descriptions' (*astadasha varnane*) in this epic. Although the description of erotic sentiment (*sringara rasa*) is predominant, the other sentiments also —like devotion (*bhakti*), heroism (*vira*), wonder (*adbhuta*), compassion (*karuna*), odium (*bibhatsa*) and tranquillity (*santa*) — have their due place in the narrative. Kanakadasa has achieved double success in this epic not only by exhibiting his devotion to Sri Krishna but also by showing an implicit equation between Sri Krishna and Sri Krishnadevaraya, the Emperor of Vijayanagara.

Although Kanakadasa was a shepherd (*kuruba*) by caste and a Vaishnava by faith, he did not oppose other faiths prevalent in Karnataka then. He was influenced by the Monistic (*Advaita*) and Dualistic (*Dvaita*) schools of thought also. That is the reason why he tried to harmonize all these schools of thought in his comprehensive poetic vision expressed in *Mohana Tarangini*.

Nala Charitre (*Story of Nala*) happens to be Kanakadasa's most popular epic fragment, consisting of nine joints (*sandhis*) and 481 *bhamini satpadi* stanzas and dealing with the tragic suffering of King Nala and Queen Damayanti occasioned by their unexpected separation and their final reunion. The story of Nala and Damayanti depicted in the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*, is so famous that it has been translated into many languages of the world. The fact that the theme of Nala and Damayanti has been depicted in forty-three Sanskrit works and in thirteen Kannada works, testifies to the extraordinary popularity of the story.

The story of Nala and Damayanti is framed by the story of the *Mahabharata*. When the five Pandavas, having lost their kingdom, are wandering about in the wilderness, Dharmaraja grows anxious about the delay in Arjuna's return from Indraloka. When he expresses his anxiety to Romesh Muni, who happens to come to Kamyaka Forest, he is consoled by the latter, who narrates the story of greater tragedies that happened to kings like Nala, Harischandra and Ramachandra. *Nala Charitre* depicts the marriage of Nala (son of Virasena, King of Nishada) and Damayanti (daughter of King Bhima of Vidarbha) who gets married according to *swayamvara*. Kali, then, decides to harass Nala by sending him to wilderness. He, therefore, takes the guise of a brahmin and gets Nala defeated in the game of dice at the hands of Pushkara. Nala loses his kingdom and goes into wilderness and abandons his wife, who returns to her parents' home. Nala is bitten by a snake and is disfigured. He joins the service under King Rituparna as a charioteer. When King Bhima conducts the re-*swayamvara* of Damayanti, Nala is identified by her and both are reunited with the blessings of all the guests and elders gathered there.

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Kanakadasa has shown the tragic suffering, the unswerving and idealistic devotion to truth and the final joy of reunion experienced by Nala and Damayanti. He has tried to delineate how pure and ideal love transcends the barriers of suffering and selfishness.

The poem is known for the use of limpid Kannada, occasional folk elements, the comprehensible *bhamini satpadi* stanza form, euphony and apt similes. All these poetic devices are monitored to express the dominant sentiment of compassion (*karuna rasa*) in a touching manner. This is possible only because of Kanakadasa's being basically a devotional poet.

His next work *Ramadhanya Charitre* (Story of the Millet) is a very short but charming narrative of 1158 bhamini satpadi stanzas, accepted by critics as an epic fragment. It contains two dominant themes: one, the story of Rama and two, the allegory of the superiority of millet (*ragi*) over rice. The poem happens to be a combination of the religious theme on the one hand and of social concern on the other thereby testifying to Kanakadasa's creative imagination.

Although the narrative does not contain any autobiographical reference to the poet, the internal evidence go to prove the indubitable authorship of Kanakadasa. References to Cennigaraya and Adikesava undoubtedly establish its inter-textual relationship with the other works of Kanakadasa.

The plot of the epic fragment may be summed up as follows: Sandilyamuni narrates the story of Sri Ramachandra and of millet and rice to Dharmaraja in order to relieve the latter of his tensions of the experience of exile. Rama returns to Ayodhya along with Sita and Laxmana after vanquishing Ravana and retrieving Sita. On the way he camps in the hermitage of Gautama Muni, partakes of the delicious meal consisting of a variety of dishes. When their discussion turns to the nine kinds of foodgrains. Hanumanta expresses his special appreciation of millet (*ragi or naredalaga*). Then there ensues a heated discussion between millet and rice. Rice taunts and insults millet, that being an inferior kind of grain the latter cannot be of any use in any holy rites of brahmanical household. But millet defends itself by saying that it is useful to all, especially the poor at all times, especially during famine and draught. Thus their quarrel grows endless. Rama therefore, orders them to be imprisoned and promises them that he would give his judgement by summoning them to Ayodhya after some time. Then Rama resumes his journey to Ayodhya. After Rama's coronation is over in Ayodhya, Rama sends for rice and millet, and calls a council meeting. The imprisonment for six months has affected the rice adversely. It, therefore, looks emaciated and disfigured. But millet looks hale and hearty as usual. Lord Indra praises the good qualities of millet wholeheartedly. All the gods bless the millet

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and endow it with their powers. Sri Rama is so happy with the millet that he renames it as Rama-dhanya or *Raghava-dhanya* (Rama-Grain) and wishes it all the best.

Ramadhanya Charitre cannot be called an epic though it narrates the story of the *Ramayana* in a condensed form. The greatness of Kanakadasa lies not only in retelling the story of Rama but also in dovetailing the allegorical rivalry between rice and millet. Personification of foodgrains for allegorical depiction cannot, perhaps, be found in any literary work of world literature. But as far as allegorical technique is concerned it is easily comparable to Swift's practice in his allegorical works like *The Battle of the Books* and *The Tale of a Tub*. As in Swift, the allegorical technique in *Ramadhanya Charitre* is motivated by a deeply felt social concern. Kanakadasa, who was born in a low caste and had suffered a great deal in the caste-ridden society of Karnataka, especially at the hands of brahmins, had an inborn sympathy for the people of the lower strata of society. It is the dichotomy between the high caste and the low caste that is allegorized in the quarrel between rice and millet. Whereas rice is used by all the people of high-castes especially brahmins for food as well as for a variety of rituals, millet is the staple food of the poor and low caste people. Though an ardent devotee of Sri Hari, Kanakadasa was at heart a rebel, who protested against the evil of communalism. He wanted to uplift the downtrodden people to an elevated level of dignity. In this sense Kanakadasa was a protesting saint-poet after Basaveswara and a host of *saranas* of the twelfth century Karnataka. The allegory of rice and millet is not to be found in the *Ramayana* of Valmiki. But it is a product of Kanakadasa's creative imagination. It was grafted into the story of Rama purely for the purpose of social amelioration. Composed in the *bhamini satpadi* stanza form, *Ramadhanya Charitre* has a mock-epic element in it, which makes it comparable to Pope's *Rape of the Lock*.

The language employed in the poem is neither too heavy nor too simple. It has the facility of Middle Kannada and can even be recited mellifluously. One may easily see the influence of Kumaravyasa's style on Kanakadasa.

Haribhakti Sara (*Essence of Devotion to Hari*) happens to be the last monolithic poetic composition of Kanakadasa, which is as popular as *Nala Charitre*. Consisting of 180 stanzas of *sataka* metre, it depicts the supreme significance of spiritual devotion to Lord Hari. The man-God relationship is characterized by self-examination, despair, anxiety and doubt followed by total surrender, detachment from worldly life and attainment of final spiritual liberation or *moksha*. Kanakadasa places himself in the position of an ardent devotee of Lord Hari and praises him recounting

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all the important qualities and events related to Him as depicted in the earlier mythical sources like the *Bhagavata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Vishnu Purana* etc. There is a happy combination of religious discourse and poetic discourse in *Haribhakti Sara*. On the whole it contains two types of descriptions: one, the great acts of the Lord in his mythical manifestations; two, philosophical speculations about the human soul, the world, God and the need for the Lord's grace for spiritual liberation. This devotional narrative is characterized by the simplicity and melliflu-ousness of the poetic language and religious imagery.

Kanakadasa is known for the composition of innumerable *kirtanas* in addition to 11 religious narratives. But so far only about 250 *kirtanas* have been published by scholars. A *kirtana* is a poetic composition glorifying God with the triple structure of a refrain, sub-refrain and stanzas of uneven numbers like 3, 5, sometimes running into 100. At the end of a *kirtana*, there is a signature of the poet referring to his favourite deity. There is no restriction about the theme of a *kirtana*. It may deal with any secular or religious theme. But devotion to Lord Hari happens to be the main theme of a majority of *kirtanas* of Kanakadasa. A *kirtana* is a song to be sung to the accompaniment of a mono-stringed instrument called *ekdari*, set to a popular *raga* (melodic pattern) and *tala* (rhythmic pattern). Thus a *kirtana* is said to be an ideal combination of religious, secular, poetic and musical discourses. Because of this ideal combination, the singing of a *kirtana* could easily capture the hearts of even illiterate listeners and inspire them towards spiritual life.

The themes of these *kirtanas* are related to devotional sentiment, glorification of God's (Hari's) greatness, grace as well as to socio-religious satire. The *kirtanas* may be broadly classified into three categories—devotional, philosophical and satirical.

The devotional *kirtanas* deal with five kinds of man-God relationship. A devotee may conceive of God as Master (*dasya-bhava*); friend (*sakhya-bhava*); husband (*madhura-bhava*); child (*vatsalya-bhava*) and a bewitching figure (*santa-bhava*). Kanakadasa assumes different roles in his relationship with Lord Hari and worships Him in different emotional channels.

The philosophical *kirtanas* of Kanakadasa articulate the doctrine of Dualism (*Dvaita*) propounded by the entire *haridasa* tradition. The *haridasas* believe in the supremacy of Lord Hari. The reality of the world and the reality of five differences — like those between individual souls; between individual souls and inanimate things; between living beings and God; between inanimate things and God and among inanimate things—and the limited liberty enjoyed by living beings. They accept God as the original image (*bimba*) and the living beings as the reflected images (*pratibimba*).

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They believe in the supremacy of the Wind-God (Vayudeva). Every worship rendered to Lord Hari should be only through the supreme guru, i.e., Vayudeva. The grace of Hari is essential for the attainment of spiritual liberation. This broad philosophical framework is woven into the warp and woof of Kanakadasa's poetry and expressed in a simple language to be understood by the common man.

In his satirical *kirtanas* Kanakadasa attacks the religious and social evils. He exposes their obsession with external rituals at the cost of inner spiritual purification and their caste-ism and purity mania. In one *kirtana*, he preaches that people should sow the seed of the divine name, i.e., Narayana in the field of the human heart, through the plough of the tongue and body and live happily in the meditation of Lord Adikesava of Kaginele. In another *kirtana* he attacks the orthodox dualists (*dvaitis*) for their mechanical indulgence in external rites and rituals and yet harbouring cunningness and deception in their heart. In yet another *kirtana* he asks, what is the use of holy rivers when a man enjoys the company of truthful ones? In one of his famous *kirtanas*, he is deeply pained by the practice of communalism in Karnataka and articulates it very touchingly:

Do not quarrel over the caste, gentlemen,
Do you know the origin of your caste?

There are no vulvas through which
Creatures are not born,
There are no parts of the earth
Which are not trodden by beings.
There are no things
Which are not cooked and eaten.
When the secret is revealed
Where is the difference between high and low?
O Man, better meditate upon the Omniscient God.

Don't you know water is
The source of all species of life?
Do you, then know the caste of water?
The mortal body is not permanent
Like a bubble of water.
O Man, better meditate upon the Omniscient God.

Lord Hari is the best of all.
Lord Hari is the master of all.
Know that the whole world
Is enveloped by Lord Hari.
Only he is highborn
Who glorifies the lotus-feet
Of Lord Adikesava of Kaginele.

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On the whole, the *kirtanas* of Kanakadasa are infused with *bhaktirasa* (devotional sentiment), woven with beautiful imagery and are musical in nature so that they can be sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

Kanakadasa has composed a number of songs called *mundiges* in Kannada. A *mundige* literally means a heavy log of wood, which has to be lifted by a wrestler. By implication it means a challenge in the form of a riddle, offered to the learned people to interpret it correctly. Just as a participant in a folk competition would lift a log of wood by a string tied to it and lift it by holding the string in his teeth and haul it over his head and win the prize, the learned man had to prove his learning by interpreting the *mundiges* (literary challenges) of Kanakadasa. He composed two kinds of *mundiges*: one, light *mundiges* dealing with mythical themes and two, mundiges dealing with the mysteris of mysticism. Many times the learned men had to plead their ignorance and helplessness and accept their defeat, as they were unable to interpret his *mundiges* correctly. That is the reason why a popular proverb came to be formed in his society, "Don't challenge Kanaka and suffer for it."

Kanakadasa may be said to be the father of *mundige* form of poetry. Long before Kanakadasa, Allamaprabhu, the twelfth century super-saint and mystic of Karnataka had composed innumerable *vachanas*, which were in the form of riddles. These fancy *vachanas* or riddle songs have not yet been properly interpreted by Kannada scholars. Kanakadasa seems to have borrowed the same technique and adapted it to his *kirtana* form. Likewise he seems to have been deeply influenced by folk proverbs and riddles. Spirituality being the general thematic concern of *mundiges*, they are an important contribution to *dasa* literature. In them Kanakadasa (unlike Allamaprabhu who is exclusively concerned with spirituality) combines the spiritual and the wordly truths. Often, the meaning of *mundiges* depends on linguistic dexterity and puns. In one *mundige*, Kanakadasa considers himself as a spiritual wife (after the *saranas* of the twelfth century Karnataka) of Rangayya, the Lord-Husband and teases Him that He cannot love the flat-breasted wife, i.e., Kanakayya of Kaginele, as He has a weakness for other *gopikas*. Here he teases God by taunting Him.

Kanakadasa's contribution to Karnataka music is undoubtedly very great, as he belongs to the *haridasa* tradition. The *haridasas*, in general, gave equal importance to devotional literature and to its musical expression thereby succeeding in capturing the hearts of listeners. As Kanakadasa was trained in Karnataka music, he wrote his *kirtanas* according to the musical requirements like melody, meaning and rhythm. His *kirtanas*, therefore, can be set to specific *ragas* and *talas* and sung very melodiously. In this respect his *kirtanas* are easily comparable those of Purandaradasa.

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Although Kanakadasa's *kirtanas* are written in mellifluous and poetic Kannada, they contain many folk phrases, proverbs and idioms thereby adding to the racy beauty of the songs. He employed not only the standard Kannada but also the folksy, racy and colloquial Kannada, because he happened to be a democratic poet and not a court-poet. Some of his poetic utterances attained epigrammatic pithiness and universality.

Kanakadasa certainly is very important saint-poet of Karnataka and belongs to the galaxy of the saint-poets of India and of the world. There is ample scope for researchers to study his themes, imagery and technique in comparison with those of the other saint-poets like Basaveswara. Akkamahadevi, Vemana, Tiruvalluvar, Eknath, Jnanadeva, Chaitanya, Meera, Kabir, John Donne, George Herbert, St. Augustine, and St. Teresa in order to see some universal patterns of religious and mystic experience.

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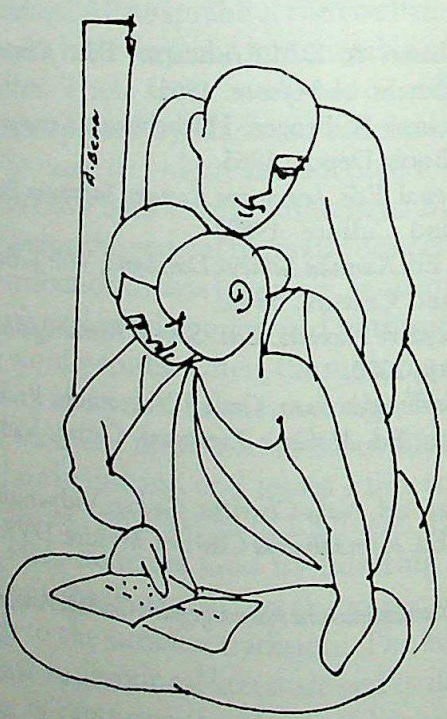
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Gopalakrishna Adiga

Nehru Will Never Retire

1

Never. Nehru will never retire.
Not bad at all.

The breeze will go on blowing as usual.
Clouds will go on gathering.
Cocks will go on crowing.
And the crow
Will turn into pure gold
And the tip of the ladder
Of long speeches put together, hook by hook.
Will surely sniff Alakaavathi's treasure
The stream of milk will flow—
Of course in the form of words—
So as to fill up all pits and holes.
All brains are levelled up,
Terminating every kind of slogan
From the snowy heights of Himalayan glory
To the sandy shores of Kanyakumari

2

Never. Nehru will never retire, never.
Let no sponger doubt it, ever.
The hero whose feet are planted on two boats;
The prince seething for the third alternative
The warrior smiling rain, wind and so on
On the water-mirror of wafer-thin streams

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In summer.
What if the feet that measure clouds
Never touch the earth?
Trampling down on poor Bali's head—
His tyranny goes on
On the boats spinning fast like tops
He, the long-armed, will reach out
For the cloud-fruit.

You talk of the dark ocean beyond death?
Absurd!
How lovely, my dear, the colours of the cloud?

3

The noble hero not afraid of the epilogue:
The ever-green youth refusing to quit the stage
Even after the curtain falls.
He goes round and round burdened with the huge sphere
Soliloquizing ninety miles per hour.
Bringing sweat to the spectators' eyes,
Groaning, pressing the bellow of sighs,
There he stands, smarting under burden
But stuck in the ever-smiling pose.
Every time the clap is heard,
He tries out a new trick, a new tune,
Unprecedented.
Houseful show,
Thanks to him.
But for him,
In a moment, for sure,
The company will go totally bankrupt.
Understand, every shareholder!
Hear, all of you, hear!

Nehru will never retire. Never.
Ten percent for all,
Don't fear.
(1958)

Translated from Kannada by H. S. Shiva Prakash

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Water for Your Paddy Fields

1

All canals watering your paddy fields
Are blocked.
Grow what you like, friend:
Art, justice, faith, law, freedom
And other forms of piles
Are fitting cushions for my Gadi.
More important than all these
Listen you, great life-force of Indian culture,
Never wag your tail;
Never grin.
Raising your brow is an extraordinary crime—
The sin of the past, suitable to the fascist of the present time.
To dance according to the given beat and rhythm
Is the noblest and most ancient custom.

2

Breaking the spine, screams the radio:
The stammerer's recommendation
For people to stand on two legs
Is a deep anti-people plot.
Law-abiding citizens must walk on all fours;
Beautiful. And no danger of a fall.
Bowing down flat on the ground
Is the very best, experts have found.

3

Pull back your tail.
Follow the orders. You shall.
It is perfectly beneficial.
A fist full of grain for hunger.
A plastic jasmine for your hair—
Don't worry about tomorrow,
We'll take care.

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Received your application.
Now neatly filed.
One grain of laddoo per head—
Freedom celebrated.
Thus you are trained to surrender to Mahakali
Slowly, but surely.

4

The baton is longer than the hand.
The sword, longer than the baton.
Even longer, bows and arrows.
And the double-barrel gun—
Isn't it greater and a lot more fun?
How about the power of buying one?
Might is money, and money, might.
If you have these even heavens you can fight.
Still you should never forget:
Right is left and left is also left—
A profound contemporary secret:
The black sheep having neither,
Is always a road-side beggar.
Creep into the corner, you bugger!
Shut your trap!
Listen to Kaliyuga's clap.

5

Yoga practice is the best medicine
For all uprising and rebellion.
All Yoga-knowing masters
Have received the news and invitation:
A huge conference was held on the topic,
'Yoga and the common man.'
And the resolution:
Shavaasana is the easiest, fastest,
And brings maximum benefit.
What are you waiting for?
You, there!

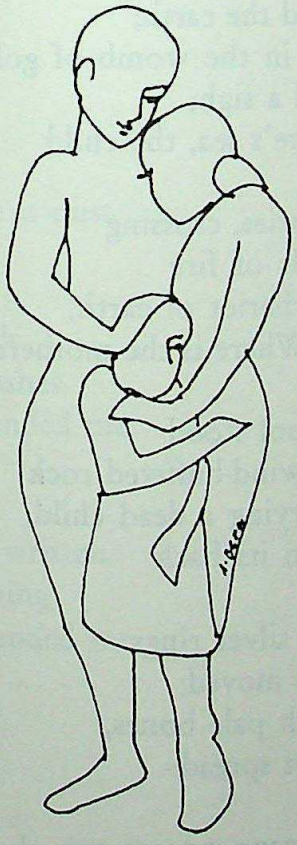
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Stretch your limbs!
Straighten your back, friends!
Relax your nerve centres,
Close your eyes,
That's better.
Breathe slowly,
Meditating on Great Mother only.
That's it – living dead, beautifully.
(1973)

Translated from Kannada by H. S. Shiva Prakash

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K.S. Narasimhaswami

Footprints

In the indistinct silence of the Stone Age,
The silent motion of the human shape;
When the earth stretched after first rains,
The living and nonliving began to clap

Blue coolness surrounded the earth;
The angry thunder hid in the womb of gold;
The rock's glom heaved a sigh;
Then was born the desire's sea, the child

Leaping over rows centuries, crossing
Flaming paths of worlds of fire
Riding red-dust drawn chariot of earth,
Came the son, asking; 'Where is the mother?'

Beneath the horizon's roof stood
A lone, huge crack on wind-buffeted rock;
Like a mad woman carrying a dead child,
A green patch spread on its back

Amidst strings of locks, silver rings
The rock's white glances moved;
In the waste littered with pale bones,
Undeterred, the footsteps spread:-

'Your threatening looks cannot scare me;
Only your blood flows in my body
Neither can barren glance drive me out
Look! The moon's shape in the huge crack!

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You want to push me down? Go ahead.
Your lap in the valley will soothe my pain
Want to throw me atop the mountain's hood?
There, like a diamond, I can shine

Have you ever bothered to look at me?
Let my eyes see you thoroughly
Not a goat, but tiger is the child's name.
Bless him with struggle for eternity'

Translated by H. S. Shiva Prakash

On the Poetry-tomb of White Flowers

1

Been here long?
No sign of sunlight;
Or a flower's net
So I wrote: The world is dust

You went on looking:
Just a few empty words
Only sparks and cold ashes
The poet's grief surrounded me

You went on looking:
Just a few words, well-written
Broken temple of learning
The poet's grief surrounded me

2

I saw: venom in every dwelling'
Body's flame; broken words;
War bugles; demon's torches

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Thousand-thundering hood of the sky;
Heart's anguish; angry curses;
The armies of eagles and dragons

Non-stop rains on stone temples;
The plague; the silver goat;
The stream licking up the bank

What name shall I call them by?
A dream? A lie?
Seems somebody named them so!

3

I saw: the beauty of every dwelling,
Body's coolness, plenitude of living;
Flowering green, the golden victory:

True, the girl I saw was dark;
But at marriage reception
How lovely, her coyness

Dark, the grapes in the vine;
So much love in the thin skin;
Let them reach my lips right now
Let earth give all it can
The jeering poet it fed on-
Pity the poet's pride

What name shall I call them by?
A dream? A lie?
Seems somebody named them so!

4

Listeners, surprised,
Bent the head down
Folded their hands
And found, they say, salvation's stairs!

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But I came for you;
You became a baby,
The smiling sky...
I call out: Where are you, father?

5

'Don't bother him, son
I am here, your mother
What do you want?'-
A hot sigh from beneath the earth

'O mother!' I called out in pain,
Tears in eyes
'Why? What happened?'
How tight the embrace!

Whose lips on my cheeks?
Whose shadow?
Fingers of light?
The breast at lips:' Drink, my child'

I wanted to see, pushing the hem
'Be quiet!' she patted
'Don't see, dear one,
This beauty, my ruin'

6

The sound of your clap, once again.....
The blind man's buff.....
The row of clouds.....
On the poetry-tombs of white flowers!

Translated by H. S. Shiva Prakash

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The Mirror

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Whose reflection did I see in my mirror?
I have been trying to get an answer for this.
I have asked all the passers by,
'You must be mad,' they said
They have gone too far, pelting stones at me
Are they mad, or
I do not know
I have sung many tunes
Many a picture have I painted
But I am not found in the song or the picture
Whom shall I ask why this is so?

On finding other's reflection in my mirror,
I have run away beyond the forest.
When the person and memory become myself
I find in the mirror myself full.
I have come to know through the world of experience.
I have tried my best to see that
the reflection in the mirror does not become mine

Mirror not mine, the reflection too not mine.
Crossing the endless bridge thus
Eighty years have I spent
I have stood right under the street lamp
This is my essence, the depth of my poem.

As I go far, the reflection in the mirror shrinks,
It is, not its fault,
They say I shall be buried in the land I ploughed
Death is comfort; the rest is calmness.

Translated by M.S. Raghunath

What Beauty is This!

The bud had not blossomed,
Bird had not sung

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The bee had not descended into the flower
The person I liked had not come home
The queen was not found in the fort.
The gardener's wife did not walk with a smile
The sprout did not call me
The boat did not reach the bank of the river
The person who beckoned was not found.
There was no sunlight on the pathway to Honnur
Myriad coloured dolls were not seen before my eyes
The wind upon the river did not wait for me
The maid with a pot on her head did not ask for my kiss.
No law exists that this person is made for the other
Time waits not, for any person
The champak does not blossom on the jasmine creeper
What beauty is this, know not I, God alone knows.

Translated by M.S. Raghunath

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Five Decades of My Writing

U.R. Anantha Murthy

My writing has a humble but mysterious, and also a seemingly silly beginning, as I see it now. The title of my talk should really be Seven Decades of My Relationship with Literature for I am running seventy five now. I was famous for a simple sentence I spoke when I must have been hardly five years old. Did I really speak it? My mother must have repeated it many times in her fondness for me. (She died three years ago, aged about 86 years). I was her eldest child and I had done well and my mother delighted in reminding me how simple I was and yet how I could say something clever and sweet to the ears.

The obviously silly sentence makes no sense unless it is contextualized. There was a woman called Abbakka – literally, sister Abba – who came to our large tile-roofed house in the midst of a jungle. Each large house like ours, a kilometre apart at least, had the name of a village and it had a few thatched huts in the vicinity where the peasants who worked for the land-owners lived. One of them was Abbakka and I remember she had twin children whom she carried in her arms tucked in her armpits. They clung to her neck. Abbakka had jasmine flowers in her oiled and tightly-plaited hair and a large kumkum on her forehead and turmeric powder on her cheeks. I think I remember her kind and mischievously smiling face and the fragrance of the jasmine flowers in her hair and the tobacco she shared secretly with my mother.

She was familiar and yet mysterious to me. This ordinarily smiling friendly domestic help who gossiped endlessly with my mother about her well-to-do and not so well-to-do relatives, broken marriages and miscarriages, her waywardly yet fond husband, her twins who clung to her always and didn't let her cook, was transformed on some nights,

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once a week. She would turn into a Devi whom the neighbours came to propitiate. She would then hold bunches of areca flowers, and wave them in the air, with her eyes closed or staring into empty space and her freshly washed, wet, dark, hair gleamed over her shoulders in the light of burning torches respectfully held in front of her. Her forehead was covered in kumkum and the whole face in saffron. Her whole body swayed rhythmically and she made an ecstatic moan as she swayed. People fell at her feet as if she was not the everyday Abbakka. She was no longer a low caste woman but a Devi who advised you where to look for your lost cow, where to get medicine for your child, how to set right the young daughter-in-law who strayed from the path of wifely duties. My grandfather, himself a priest who consulted the almanac and cowrie shells and found the right star and date for auspicious occasions, would be a witness of this Abbakka with me on his shoulders. 'Abbakka has power when the Devi possesses her, which I don't have,' he would tell me.

After one such night Abbakka came home to work as usual for Mother in the morning. This is how my mother used to tell me the story of my gift with words. Abbakka stands there with her twins tucked in her armpits under a pomegranate tree in the back of our house and I, standing beside the well, cry out this sentence: *Ábbakkanna gubbakka kachchikondu hoythu*. It appears Abbakka was so delighted with my gibberish that she went near a drain and emptied her full mouth of half-chewed tobacco—a real sacrifice—for, she wanted to hug and kiss me. What had I said after all? It was just a silly rhyme of Abbakka and *gubbakka*. *Gubbakka* is an expression of fondness for the bird *gubbi*, a sparrow—a small bird. Abbakka was large and *gubbakka* was small but I had ventured to imagine that the big Abbakka was carried off by *gubbakka* in her small beak which picked up seeds and worms. Had I tried to match a supernatural sight of our Abbakka becoming a Devi with another fantastic happening of a small bird carrying her away? I must have done this not as an idea but as a sheer delight in rhyming a word.

I remember this, thanks to the love and pride of my mother, and I wonder: don't I work even now to balance a sentence and get the right kind of rhythm in my prose and thereby admit into my writing, from an unknown source, meanings that I did not consciously or deliberately pursue? It is like a sudden gift when you get it in your language. Only in your language spoken by your people, can you do this. This is indeed a primitive kind of source, and, however intelligent and sophisticated you are in your meaning, if you lose this primitive, magical gift you

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can't be a poet. You can only be a writer. Our great poets—Bendre, Adiga and Kambar—have this gift of making a play of words, a *leela* of *shabd*, create great meanings. But as a writer I am aware it can't be done deliberately and self-consciously.

☆ ☆ ☆

We lived in a house surrounded by a jungle. It could be frightening on dark, moonless, starlit nights. There were corners of the house to which I would not venture, all by myself. We would some nights hear the roar of a tiger. The cows in our shed heard this earlier than us and their restlessness got communicated to us by the sound of bells tied round their necks. My grandfather and mother would make me repeat the names of Arjuna to protect me from my fright—*Arjuna Phaalguno Paartha Kireeti Shwethavahanah*. Next morning the servants who came to work repeated the same old stories of encounters with tigers which do not harm you if you do not intend harming them, and if you do not show fright when they look at you. The same with snakes which I sometimes found crawling between country-made tiles on the roof.

What is my earliest memory— my own memory and not something given to me by those who loved me? My house was built a few yards away from the surrounding jungle and my grandfather almost every morning went with his sickle to cut new growth in front of the house so that the jungle did not encroach on the house. When it rained heavily for days together in the monsoon we searched for dry spaces in the house where the rain water did not trickle from the tiled roof. The whole house and all the servants and relatives who could spare time helped us a month before the monsoon set in to get dry firewood to be stored for the rainy season and all the food items like rice, dhal and sticky 'joni' jaggery, stocked in pots. Jackfruit from the forest in all its stages of maturity—raw to ripe and smelly fruit—served even as food cooked in various ways. The buffaloes craved for this with their noses dilated and up in the air, along with us, the forever hungry children. We sat before the big bathshed fire with hands stretched to get warm, as it rained heavily making everything else invisible except those sitting around the blazing fire. We told each other the same stories with variations, that the warmth of the fire and the shining eyes of the listener inspired in us, and roasted the seeds of the jackfruit which was kept in a heap beside us and ate them with great relish. Also, varieties of greens growing all around, whose various names and medicinal properties the elders in the house knew, were also cooked as side dishes. During summer, my

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mother dried various food items in the sun to preserve them for rainy days-friable pappads, chewable dried fruits. Summer made us crave for monsoon and the monsoon made us crave again for summer and harvest time when Byaari Muslim itinerant sellers and buyers came to exchange city valuables with the village produce. They wore colourful dress and caps and their footwear attracted me. I remember asking a friendly Byaari for a pair to wear and I got my first ever chappals a year later as a present. The Byaari had rightly guessed my size from an impression he had taken on an old newspaper a year earlier. And the Byaaries brought crunchy sweets and *kallu sakkare* and presented them in paper-wrapping to us children and told us stories of towns where they lived. No newspaper wrapping was never thrown away; the news in them were read over and over again and used as wrappers for old books in the house.

The morning sun whose rays came through the forest and fell on our little clearance in front of the house, was my friend and I basked in the patches of light on the verandah. My earliest memory is this: I pick out a leaf from a *kalli* plant, thick and green, and slowly bend it backward and press it. A gluey white liquid oozes in the bent-and-pressed middle portion of the leaf. You have to slowly, very slowly push the edges so that the liquid becomes a lens like surface. This is a delicate task, for it can always break. If you are lucky and it does not break, then you have to wait for luck, carry it where the thin, translucent spread catches a few rays of the sun. It is a miracle of colours then on your palm. I remember how prayerfully I would do this with enormous patience and concentration and feel grand about myself. Isn't this the way one works with words too in the making of poems?

My mother would catch me doing this and call out to be careful, for the milky liquid from the leaf was bad for the eye and it could spurt into my eyes while I pressed it. And I could catch a cold in the morning mist.

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My early education was not in a school, for it was too far away and therefore in my fifth year my mother initiated me to writing, on the patch of sand spread on the floor, in the open veranda of the house with large carved pillars of jackfruit tree-wood; with my forefinger she made me write on the sand my first alphabet, praying to Goddess Saraswati. My father and grandfather took care of my education. I remember one poem that my father read out to me, for there were tears in his eyes as he read it out to me. I have seen my mother cry, even the Devi

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Abbakka cry. I have never seen my father cry, except when he read this poem which we call "Govina haadu"—The Song of the Cow. The poem begins, revealing the whole globe first as if a camera in the sky catches a vast space, and then the poem moves from a long shot to a close-up. In the centre of the globe is Karnataka. In Karnataka lives a cowherd called Kalinga. He calls all the cow-mothers. What are their names? Ganga, Gowri, Tunga Bhadra—two of them are rivers, tells my father.

Our cow Punyakoti, while grazing strays accidentally into the territory of a tiger. The tiger is hungry. It is the dharma of the tiger to eat whatever comes into its territory. Punyakoti has to yield herself to the hunger of the tiger but begs permission of the tiger to let her go back to the shed and feed its young calf, which is hungry too, and after fulfilling her motherly duty, she promises that she will come back to become food to the tiger. There is a moving passage as Punyakoti feeds her calf and advises her never to stray into a territory which is not rightfully her own and bids a tearful farewell requesting her other companion-cows not to butt her child if she comes in front and not to kick her if she goes behind them and thus to mother her orphaned child.

The tiger waiting hungrily can not believe that Punyakoti is there before him offering her all, her hot, flowing blood, her strong muscles, her soft flesh as food to be eaten. There is a sudden change of heart in the tiger. Our anonymous Kannada poet knows that the tiger's heart may change but not its nature. In a Sanskrit original, it seems, the tiger after undergoing a change of heart becomes a *tapaswi*. But our Kannada poet is a realist and therefore makes the tiger jump off a precipice and kill himself.

It is one of the great poems extolling non-violence and truth—a cow triumphing over a hungry tiger. It is a surreal poem. A surreal Gandhian poem, I should say.

Ever since I got to know this poem, Karnataka is in the centre of the globe for me. No language is ethnic or just regional only because it is bound within a geographical space. The first known author of Kannada, Srivijaya who wrote *Kavirajamarga* a thousand years ago, defined Kannada as a language spoken from Kaveri to Godavari, and the people living in such a land as a *janapada* conceived in the language Kannada. (More precisely, in *that* Kannada, thus importing to the language a metaphysical and abstract dimension. My late friend K.V.Subbanna writes movingly about this in his classical work which the Akademi honoured.)

No writer in the past in my language thought that he was limited because he did not write in a cosmopolitan language like Samskruta. Our first Mahakavi Pampa knew his Kalidasa and admiring him tried to do

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better. Our great Vachana poets of the 12th century were original thinkers and spiritual seekers and recreated the Upanishadic search on their own terms. Kuvempu, a writer of our times, invokes the epic poets of the world and says that *Ramayana* has created the Kuvempu-poet. I do not mean to say that everything in Kannada is worthy to be termed as world literature; such a claim is meaningless for any language. Srivijaya of *Kavirajamarga* has both the qualities of humility and self-confidence when he says Kannada is unique and at the same time partakes of the larger world.

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When I look back on my early years of growing up in a larger village than the one in which I spent my childhood days, (during my middle and high school years)I realize now that I had all I needed to become the writer I am now. In the nineteen forties, the adult education committee used to bring out a journal called *Pustaka Prapancha* which came to our village library and I read it avidly. But an unforgettable event for me was reading Karanth's *Chomana Dudi* and Kuvempu's *Kanooru Heggadathi*.

I believe that you can love the past only when you learn to hate intensely a part of the past. I grew up in an *agrahara*, a row of Brahmana houses on the bank of the river Tunga in the Sahyadri mountain area of Malnad. I grew up in a tolerant orthodox Brahmana house, for, my father, a self-educated man, got Gandhi's *Harijan* and read it to his friends. He was a Lowkika Brahmin, unlike my grandfather who was a Vaidika Brahmin. More accurately my father was in between the Lowkika and Vaidika state in his mental make-up and vacillated between the two. He had a tuft as well as a cropped head, and one of these two looked more prominent reflecting his orthodox other-worldly and/or worldly state. The changes I underwent under his loving and sceptical eyes ultimately made him a crop-headed man. Still in one of his depressive moods he would elaborately go through the *Vishnu-sahasranama* with all the rituals of drawing, and consecrating saffron-and-red-coloured rangoli patterns on the floor.

The world in which I grew up assumed that the caste system and the hierarchies associated with it were rock-like and permanent and God-made. I happened to read Karanth's novel and it changed me. Such changes are not just political; they have a spiritual dimension too. It changes your whole world. The impact was simple and profound. The untouchable, who came to clean our cowshed every morning ever so quietly and invisibly, suddenly became a person for me with an inner

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life. I thought, he too, like Chomla, has a deep inner self from which I am totally banished. It was my loss and certainly can't be God-ordained. It was man-made. My father worked for a religious *muth* and the *muth* symbolized for me the authority that sustained oppression and darkness of the spirit. He would go to a law-court in the service of the *muth* and bring a decree against a poor tenant and feel for days uncomfortable over it.

Along with this new awareness, Kuvempu's novel, the action of which takes place in the hilly lush-green area in which I lived, filled everything I saw with an aura. The bridge-like rock structure on the river Tunga, which I crossed as a school-boy when I went to my mother's place, was what the hero of Kuvempu's novel too crossed. The thunder and lightning of the actual monsoon happened to me with the same awe its description in the novel had created for me as I sat and read the novel in some dry, comfortable corner of my *agrahara* house all alone. Great, imaginative literature is always an invitation to freedom and to day-dream. It frees you from the time and space that circumscribe you. The hero of Kuvempu's novel, Hoovayya, too, sits upstairs in his jungle-surrounded Malnad house, far away from our civilization and reads Arnold and Wordsworth. Almost a surreal happening. The author thus opens out for us two different times and two different worlds—both existentially real and in tandem.

For me, my early experiences are important in making me what I am today. I will now describe a typical day in my life as a high school boy. I would get up early, bathe in the river Tunga and go to a traditional Samskruta school where a few of us in the *agrahara* got lessons in Samskruta *vyakarana* and some *adhyaayaas* of Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsha*. Then I would wear my shirt and walk barefooted to my high school in a small town. This would sometimes take more than an hour, for, as a group, we boys had our own adventures along the forest path. In the school we had teachers from far away places and, what is important, from other castes as well. My schoolmates were also a mix.

(Allow me to digress a little here. Pleading for common schools and equality in education, I have been saying that I became a writer not in my traditional *angavastram* which I wore into my Samskruta traditional school in the *muth*, but in the 'impure' shirt which I wore to school, thus coming in contact with the rest of the society. We have lost it now with the special private, expensive schools for the well-to-do and the neglected government schools for the poor. The mother tongue as medium of instruction at least up to the tenth standard, matters for the growth of a rooted mind all his/her life. Those who study in the

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English medium are cut off from the life of the poor, our own people, and their rich, vibrant, indigenous cultures. This is a crime, in my opinion, and most of us are guilty of it although we don't approve of it intellectually. As a nation, we are used to living in, what Sartre calls, 'bad faith'.)

My real school of life was different. It was the backyard of my house, with secret medicinal plants which only my grandfather knew (and I would be initiated into, he would say, after I grew up), and a never-drying well my mother and some other women of the village drew water from. And all the women had some gossip to share with my mother and my mother shared whatever delicacy she had prepared or left-over food with women of all castes. They talked of their bodily ailments which they could not talk to other men-folk and also secretive sexual relationships that the so called 'respected' people indulged in, even those who appeared to be strictly orthodox in the hilly *agrahara*. There was literally an under-world, below the Sahyadri mountains in some permissible coastal islets, safely hidden in the backwaters. Had I not listened to these gossips I would not have grown up the story-teller I am, reflecting on the gap between appearance and reality in human affairs. It is liberating to know that those we think are powerful have clay-feet.

Some of my teachers were modern and even rationalist. It was fashionable for graduates to question our traditional notions. I remember a teacher telling us how a long argument like in the *Bhagavad-Gita* could not take place on a battlefield. This had distressed me as a boy steeped in our lore. I would carry different coloured bottles to bring medicine for the sick in my *agrahara*. It was a task that we boys shared for the sake of the mothers in the whole village. I remember waiting for the bottles to be filled in coloured liquids and a neatly dressed and shaven man lounging in the doctor's shop talking to us of what he had read. He belonged to the family of an absentee landlord and he had read Bernard Shaw, Voltaire and Mill. He had even a radio which he ran with the help of a dynamo, for there was no electricity in our taluk. The story went around that this man who had changed his name and anglicized it from Srinivas into Sinha, could get BBC on his radio; he had also cultivated a sophisticated British accent. After many years when I told him that I got a Commonwealth Scholarship to study in England, he didn't ask me 'when are you flying?' He was *correct* and asked, 'when are you emplaning?' When I read Nirad Chaudhuri I remember him. One of my important characters in my novel *Bharathipura* is somewhat like him.

After listening to Sinha open-mouthed, we would leisurely walk

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back home, eating groundnuts which we bought in a wayside shop with some annas of the ritual *dakhsina*, we Brahmana boys, had saved. Peeling and munching the roasted groundnuts, we would argue among ourselves what Sinha had propounded. On some evenings or holidays we would also listen to serious debates between an Arya Samajist who came from town and our traditional Samskruta pundit. I remember an argument as to whether the earth was flat or round and whether the earth went round the sun or vice versa. And how eclipses happened and why we should attach religious meanings to such natural events. I have said somewhere that I could have been a contemporary of Galileo!

And what Mahatma Gandhi said and did was always in the background of our discussions. Much of it was not about transfer of power from the British, but whether it is right to allow the untouchables into temples. Some elders in the village thought that Gandhi was the Kali purush who had appeared at the end of his reign and not the Kalki, the saviour, as my father had argued. I still think that Gandhi is great, as I did in my high-school days too, because when he was thrown out of a first class compartment for being a coloured man, he not only got angry about the treatment meted out to him, but realized how we too humiliate our own countrymen. This self-reflective critical sense that the Mahatma generated is what made our generation creative in many of our chosen fields. We were taught to think of India both as a country to be liberated from *pharangi* rule and a society to be reformed and rejuvenated.

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Once, the plague epidemic struck our taluk and schools were closed. Many relatives living in small towns came to our *agrahara* to live with us. Doctors came and inoculated all of us against the plague. But they did not go up the hill where the untouchables lived. They were both untouchable and invisible. When some of their men and women did not come to clean our cowsheds, we got to know that they had begun to die of plague and sometimes when all the people in a hut died they burnt down the thatch-roofed hut.

In those days I had begun to admire a young man who had come back from the army to our *agrahara*. He brought to us a new world altogether—a world without the taboos of our narrow and strict Brahminical life. He had got into the army rebelling against his orthodox family, and his parents were happy he was back and he was ritually purified with *panchagavya* and accepted back into the fold. The young man started a

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football club for us who were not going to school and drilled us as in the army, and many of us who had begun to admire Subhash Chandra Bose admired this young man too. He had seen places which we had learnt to identify only in the Indian map that we studied in the Geography class. There was also a young woman from the Harijan colony who came to clean the sheds and I could not help thinking that she was one of the most attractive young women I knew. Of course this was at an age when such feelings are aroused beyond the confines of orthodox taboos. Did not the great and venerable sage Parashara fall instantly in love with the fish-smelling Matsyagandhi while crossing the Yamuna in a boat she rowed? The creator of *Mahabharata* became the *sadyojatha*, the instant-born, of this union. In most of the great Indian works and in Bhakthi poetry too, the erotic and the spiritual co-exist.

Our ex-army young man had a secret liaison with her. This also I had guessed. When people in her colony began to die I came to know that she suddenly disappeared. Everyone said she was afraid that she would also die and so she ran away.

Elders in the village, some of them well-informed in religious matters, and more cynically adept in conducting land litigations, used to argue that God was angry with the untouchables for following Gandhi and entering temples and therefore they were punished with the plague. I argued, at least with my school-going friends, that this was a stupid and immoral reasoning, for, those who died were not inoculated, because they were untouchable. When the girl ran away I wrote a story.

I had written this story for a manuscript magazine which we edited and circulated in the *agrahara*. I had called it *Tharangini* (The Wavy Lake). We used to carry articles in three languages: Kannada, Samskruta and the newly-learnt English. I wrote a highly metaphorical story on the girl running away.

I had to do this metaphorically for I did not want the elders to know what I knew. Metaphors serve as hiding places for writers in all ages—certainly for writers like Dostoevsky in Tsarist Russia. I rewrote the story of the sleeping princess who was aroused by the touch of the prince. Ever since, 'touch' has become one of my themes.

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I must now move away in time and then come back to the days of my youth. This was in the sixties and I was a doctoral student in Birmingham and my first guide was the famous novelist and critic, Malcolm Bradbury. He was my age and I admired his learning and his curiosity and openness.

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We together saw in the University Film Society Bergman's *Seventh Seal*. The film shown had no subtitles. What you misunderstand or barely understand can be very stimulating and productive when you are also ready for such stimulation. I barely understood the film as a story of crisis—a crisis of belief in medieval Europe which encountered its mysterious 'other' in the Crusades.

I remember telling Professor Bradbury after the film as we had a draught beer in the student union bar, the following:

When a European has to recreate the medieval ages he does so through learning and research. But for me the medieval is immediate; it is present in my relatives and in some of my deep feelings along with the present. My marriage could have taken place according to the viewpoint of my medieval grandmother while the job I do may be in an office belonging to the modern world system. I live in several worlds at the same time. Centuries co-exist in our consciousness for our history has not moved in a straight line forward as in the case of Europe. Chaucer telling *Canterbury Tales* during a pilgrimage is as contemporary for us as Dickens writing in an industrializing London and Camus with his metaphysical questions.

I was thinking then of a typical day in my high school—meeting Sinha in a clinic and a teacher criticizing the *Bhagavad-Gita* and listening to an argument which was long ago settled by Galileo. Bradbury said that I must find a way of reflecting this in my creative writing.

This served as a good excuse for me for I could delay my next chapter of the thesis. Also, suddenly I remembered the story of the sleeping princess I had trickily retold in the manuscript magazine. In less than a week I wrote my novel *Samskara*.

I must say the novel got written by me. I was fatigued having to speak English all the time, and when I sat down to write all my Kannada, alive from my childhood and boyhood memories—mostly from the whispered secrets I had heard in the backyard of my house, as well as from the front yard where men sonorously recited morally ennobling Puranic stories—came back to me and the characters entered into my novel on their own. All the great, older writers in my language communicated their strength to me in a silent manner. I must also add here that I belonged, in all my earlier stories like "Ghatashradha," to the Navya School of writing and our inspiration came from the great poetry of Gopalakrishna Adiga who had interiorized the one thousand-year-old Kannada tradition and opened out to the influence of modern European and English writers.

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Before I became a 'Navya' writer in the early fifties, I was a student of the Maharaja's College, Mysore, where great teachers like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Hiriyanna had taught. Before I came to Mysore, after my high school, I had come under the influence of Jayaprakash Narayan and Lohia and became active as a socialist worker. These were great days in my life. My father too had moved to Shimoga and we had a printing press with a treadle machine. The now famous Kagodu Raitha Satyagraha was planned also in the first floor of my house and I had got my parents involved in this. My mother overcame much of her orthodoxy cooking and serving food to the socialist leaders and workers who stayed with us. We had a charismatic leader who came from the peasant classes, Shanthaveri Gopala Gowda. He spoke metaphorically like a poet and the common masses and peasants understood him. He was truly a politician-cum-teacher and he used the past and present Kannada poetry and fiction in his speeches. He was one of the most influential of my readers until his untimely death.

These were also days of intense debates among us centered on political philosophy. Shimoga town had a few committed communist trade unionists and intellectuals who were followers of M N Roy. Gopala Gowda knew Lohia and Ramanandan Mishra of Bihar. We argued that caste was a reality in India and we should organize the peasants first to end the Genidaari system. Kagodu Struggle was a result of this and Lohia came and courted arrest in the village Kagodu near Sagar. Although I failed in my intermediate examination as a result of my being engrossed in the struggle, I learnt a lot and my capacity to connect literature and politics grew at this time. I wrote most of the pamphlets, and booklets on the peasant question under the guidance of Ramanandan Mishra. And those days I read much of Gorky and developed a fondness for Shelley. I read Premchand and Abbas and, in Kannada, the most popular progressive writers of those times ANAKRU and TARASU. I remember being critical, in those days, of JP inviting Aurobindo to enrich Indian socialism with his spiritual insights. We were on the side of Lohia and, like him, extremely critical of Stalinism and the communist refusal to join the 'Quit India' movement.

I was also, paradoxically, an ideological and yet critical admirer of socialist realism in those days. I had come under the affectionate and warm influence of Niranjana, a spokesman then of the communist line in literature. I have ignored much of my emotionally immature writing of those days and have not collected them in any of my published books. It was only after I learnt to submit myself to the all-engrossing creative processes within me, that my own immaturity as a person and my

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'opinionated' self began to matter much less. When I look back, I wonder sometimes how I could write what I did at a particular stage of my life, in my twenties, when I was rather foolishly romantic and idealistic. This is true not only of my creative work but more surprisingly of one piece of criticism I wrote on the new poetry of Adiga after I had finished my master's and became a temporary lecturer in a moffusil college.

☆ ☆ ☆

From the moffusil Shimoga I had come to Mysore for my Honours and was privileged to be a student of the Late Professor C D Narasimhaiah, then a young, attractive man, and a passionate Leavisite. He had just then come back from Cambridge where F R Leavis was his guru. Being a socialist, I was very critical of the Leavisite modernism and Eliot's conservative royalist and classicist position. Niranjana had asked me to write a few articles on my opposition to modern poetry and my admiration for Shelley whose works, well, almost all of them, I had read in my Honours days. I could not afford paying for my education and therefore much of the time I was in free hostels meant for the poor students. But I was happy in my own way, for, K V Subbanna was my friend and he initiated me to much of old Kannada literature. My other friend was Shankaranarayana Bhatta with whom I endlessly discussed land reform. He was a socialist and a landlord himself. My friends took care of all my needs and I literally lived a socialist life, where it did not matter who had money, for it was shared by all of us.

Gopala Krishna Adiga was then undergoing a change in his poetic style. No other writer in Karnataka was as critical of his own successful past as Adiga. He was a celebrated poet in the tradition of Bendre, Kuvempu and Putina, but he rejected his own creations in the earlier mode. I was critical of Adiga too, for, politically he was against not only the revolution in Russia and Stalinist manoeuvres after being a communist sympathizer himself during his successful years as a writer, but had turned sceptical of all revolutions.

I remember the dramatic change I went through. Although ideologically I was opposed to Adiga and Eliot, one evening I sat down and read Adiga's new poems and Eliot's *Preludes*. I was deeply moved by them and I was confused. My literary instinct overcame all my opinions and I remember withdrawing the articles I wrote for Niranjana. I began to meet Adiga in the Mysore coffee house and shared my inner life with him. While we talked about Eliot and Yeats and Pound in the class room, in the coffee house I began to read Adiga's poems as and when

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he wrote them. I remember how eagerly I waited for him when he put his hand in his coat pocket to bring out a sheet of paper closely and neatly written in his own hand, and he would shyly give it to me to read. He never interpreted his own poems and never argued if I did not particularly like them. One particular poem called *Bhutha* had appeared to me as 'much ado about nothing' and I had said so bluntly to him. He had just smiled and put it back in his pocket. But months later I remember, as I was bathing, some lines of the poem came back to me—for his lines are usually very memorable—and the meaning of the poem flashed on me. I immediately wrote him a letter telling him what I thought of the poem. I was a lecturer in Shimoga then and he asked me whether I would write a preface to his collection of such poems which he called *Bhumigeetha*, the song of the earth. The poems in this collection are classics now and I have grown with them. Adiga had strong views on political questions, and was deeply troubled by the direction the nation had taken under Nehru's leadership. He was on the whole in sympathy with the position that Rajaji had taken, and yet appreciative of Dr. Lohia's writings. He even translated Lohia's *Wheel of History* into Kannada. I remember the meetings we used to have in the Mysore coffee house with Dr. Lohia.

But Adiga's apparent conservatism did not bother me. For like Eliot and Yeats, he was also in a search for making language enact an idea as metaphor and image rather than state it. He thought that much of our outpourings in musical, lyrical poetry were verbal diarrhoea. He had rejected what he once practised; poetry for him was no longer what it was for Wordsworh— 'a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings....' It was something to be forged in the smithy of one's soul.

We formed into a loose group around Adiga. The important writers then—not to the public at large, but to a few of us—were Ramachandra Sharma, A.K.Ramanujan, Shantinatha Desai, Yashwant Chittal, Gangadhara Chittal, Shankar Mokashi Punekar, Keertinath Kurtukoti, Lankesh, Tejasvi, Sadashiva, TG Raghava and Rajalakshmi N Rao. We differed from each other on many issues, including aesthetic issues, but we shared a basic assumption that literary creation is a deeply self-reflexive search to be realized in language. (Mokashi and Kurtukoti differed from us, and Tejasvi was different too in his significant choices of theme and narration) The more popular literary world was rhetorical, celebratory and sentimental— that was what we believed. Personally I was different from all of them with my own memories and preoccupations but I learnt from all of them. Lankesh who was immediate in his literary style was the one writer who could write honestly of his own very personal growing-up em-

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barrassments, and he was an unsparing critic of all masks—the masks that unwittingly his own companions in the Navya literary world, he thought, wore. This was a quiet movement opposed by those in power in the literary establishment (not all the names I mentioned above would agree that they were Navya) and into this world of serious literary practitioners and experimenters came two more talents, Kambar and Girish Karnad—two writers distinctly different from each other. No other Kannada literary movement produced such distinct, individualistic voices in the late 1950s and early 60s. On my own early experiments with short-story writing, Rajeev Taranath, a literary theoretician and a distinguished Sarod player, was a stimulating influence.

Through Adiga I came to know the great M.Govindan of Malayalam literature, who lived in Chennai and from him a host of others who are my friends—the late O V Vijayan, a major Indian writer, the late G.Aravindan, the fantastic filmmaker, and Adoor Gopalakrishnan, the Chekhov-like filmmaker and the late Ayyappa Paniker, a major poet of our times, and Kadamanatta Ramakrishnan, a poet of elemental passion. I talked to the socialist leader Gopala Gowda about Adiga and Gopala Gowda talked about Adiga to Kamlesh Shukla and Lohia, and Kamlesh got me to know the Late Nirmal Verma, again a major Indian fiction writer and thinker, and Ashok Vajpeyi, who made Bhopal our cultural capital. Lohia talked about my novel *Samskara* to the Telugu poet, the late Pattabhi Rama Reddy and he made it into a film. Girish Karnad who had seen my novel in manuscript form showed it to the painter Vasudev and Australian Cameraman Tom Cowan and all these happenings became a movement. What really works for us, the Indian language writers, is this grapevine. I got to know the work of Namwar Singh through Kamlesh and Namwar Singh published my essays in Hindi. Another such network was formed during our opposition to the Emergency.

Indian literature in the Bhashas is ONE for me, for, have I not felt like calling Nirmal Varma in the middle of one night to tell him how deeply moved I was by one of his stories? Dilip Chitre and I do this to each other whenever we read something new and get excited. I share the political, cultural and literary concerns of Mahasweta Devi, and Bhalachandra Nemade. My young friend and activist thinker and literary critic G N Devi has given their works a much-needed theoretical framework. I can differ and argue with G N Devi for I share with him the warm memories of the late Shanthinath Desai, a fellow writer. Sitanshu Yashaschandra, a major voice in Gujarati, came to my life with one of his ironic and brilliant poems while he was a young writer in a seminar that the late Prabhakar Padhye had arranged in Pune in the

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late 60s. Young writers had travelled in bus and train to attend this historic seminar. A few months ago I read one of the stories of Uday Prakash introduced into Kannada by Prasanna (published in *Desha Kaala*) and I felt a deep sense of fulfillment that the Indian Bhashas are still creating strong and original voices. These are the kind of works that get written, perhaps rarely, in English (except by writers like Amitav Ghosh, Raja Rao, R.K Narayan and Shashi Deshpande, to name a few that I like) and is more likely to be written by someone who has a rural plus urban experience and deep roots in one's *desi* tradition. And such a writer inhabits two worlds simultaneously—the modern western and the timeless, traditional Indian. Such a writer writes deeply, for, he/she does not write for export, and has no celebratory intention of the communalized traditionalist or the market-oriented stratagems of the global Indian writer.

A writer like me in Kannada can encounter the whole world in a niche created by my friend late K V Subbanna in Ninasam, in a small village in the Sahyadri mountain district. Friends like Ashish Nandy, Shiv Vishwanathan, and Shamik Bandopadhyaya come there and young people from all over Karnataka interested in theatre and literature gather there every year, and hold discussions with them. Language does not matter here, for English and Kannada do not have a hegemonic relationship any more in our gatherings.

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Metaphors come to me as gifts when I am obsessed with a theme and do not know how to express it. These metaphors have their roots in my early rural experience but they branch into my adult, modern life. Let me go back and recount an incident. In the traditional Samskruta School of the *muth* in my *agrahara* I had a teacher who had taken the *aparigraha vratha*. He had one meal a day, and that too, a few mouthfuls only. He had two pieces of cloth, a *mundu* and an *angavastram* which he washed everyday and dried on the sands of the Tunga river. When it was dark he read his Samskruta books standing near an oil lamp in a niche of the wall until it burnt out and then he slept on the floor. He never looked at anything with any desire. When he taught me Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* I used to wonder how he could translate for me all the erotic passages. Once a slightly deranged man came to him as he was teaching me and asked him for his *angavastram* with which he had covered his torso. My teacher told him that it is not a new one and how he could gift it. The man said he needed it, new or old. My teacher gave it away

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and lived till the next Ugadi without an *angavastram*. A new *angavastram* was due to him only on Ugadi day.

I was growing very critical of religion in those days for its practice of untouchability but this young *tejasvi* was an enigma to me. I never knew what was going on in his mind, but one day he picked a leaf of the *aswatha* tree and dropped it to receive a command from the above. This much he had told me the previous day—that he would do this. On which side did it drop, was a sign for him from the above. The dropped leaf said, 'Go'. He smiled at me and blessed me and walked away to the Himalayas. He just disappeared thus.

Around the time I wrote *Samskara*, while I was a student in Birmingham, England, I also wrote a story called "Clip Joint." My hero thinks of this saintly man of the monastery of my *agrahara*, as he wanders in the erotic zone of Soho in London.

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I was very fortunate in England for Richard Hoggart was one of my teachers, and David Lodge was my guide. I was a part of the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Culture where Stuart Hall of the New Left was one of the most articulate thinkers and Raymond Williams often came to talk to us. I grew in this rich, culturally committed, socialist atmosphere and the early influence of Lohia on me made it possible for me to interact actively with the group in Birmingham in the early sixties.

After my return to India I found my novel *Samskara*, my stories "Clip Joint" set in England and my village, and "Mouni" set in the world of land litigations, also my essays on the importance of Kannada for creating new knowledge, and my opposition to the hegemony of English, had begun to matter to the thinking and writing of some others like me who are some of the best writers of Kannada today.

But I had a problem. The writing of my novel *Samskara* was almost a magical act for me and its success and reputation became a hindrance. I just could not write another novel for a long time; it was as if I was under the spell of my own work. After a few years I recovered from this—the influence of the group in the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Culture must have helped me in reorienting myself—and I wrote my *Bharathipura*.

Many critics feel that the novel is too discursive, but I don't feel apologetic about it. I think that I discovered deeper roots in my tradition, by my opposition to it as a critical insider. The novel is not in the tradition of realistic novels. It has a realistic body, but it is also a parable. The

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novel takes place in a semi-urban temple town and the hero of my novel who has returned after an education in England is the chief patron of this temple. He realizes that he is unreal and inauthentic as a person unless he demystifies the Lord Manjunatha of the temple. The whole economy of this poor temple-town depends on the money collected by the devotees. The aura of Manjunatha is built around the belief that no untouchable can enter the temple and if they do so the Lord will punish them. My hero begins to build a movement for the entry of the untouchables. The hero Jagannath had grown up under the aura of this temple and therefore his fight is against himself and not just against an institution. Let me quote a passage from the novel. The hero decides that he should first make the untouchables touch the sacred *saligram* of his own traditional zamindari house:

> Words stuck in his throat. This stone is nothing, but I have set my heart on it and I am reaching it for you: touch it; touch the vulnerable point of my mind; this is the time of evening prayer; touch; the *nandadeepa* is burning still. Those standing behind me [his aunt and the priest] are pulling me back by the many bonds of obligation. What are you waiting for? What have I brought? Perhaps it is like this: this has become a *saligram* because I have offered it as stone. If you touch it, then it would be a stone for them. This, my importunity, becomes a *saligram*. Because I have given it, because you have touched it, and because they have all witnessed this event, let this stone change into a *saligram*, in this darkening nightfall. And let the *saligram* change into a stone. But the pariahs recoil in horror.
>
> Jagannath tried to soothe them. He said in his everyday tone of a teacher: 'This is mere stone. Touch it and you will see. If you don't, you will remain foolish forever.'
>
> He did not know what had happened to them, but found the entire group recoiling suddenly. They winced under their wry faces, afraid to stand and afraid to run away. He had desired and languished for this auspicious moment — this moment of the pariahs touching the image of God. He spoke in a voice choking with great rage: 'Yes, touch it!'
>
> He advanced towards them. They shrank back. Some monstrous cruelty overtook the man in him. The pariahs looked like disgusting creatures crawling upon their bellies.

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He bit his under-lip and said in a low, firm voice: 'Pilla, touch it! Yes, touch it!'

Pilla stood blinking. Jagannath felt spent and lost. Whatever he had been teaching them all these days had gone to waste. He rattled dreadfully: 'Touch, touch, you TOUCH IT!'

It was like the sound of some infuriated animal and it came tearing through him. He was sheer violence itself; he was conscious of nothing else. The pariahs found him more menacing than Bhutaraya [the demon-spirit of the local god]. The air was rent with his screams. 'Touch, touch, touch.' The strain was too much for the pariahs. Mechanically they came forward, just touched what Jagannath was holding out to them, and immediately withdrew.

Exhausted by violence and distress Jagannath pitched aside the *saligram*. A heaving anguish had come to a grotesque end. Aunt could be human even when she treated the pariahs as untouchables. He had lost his humanity for a moment. The pariahs had been meaningless things to him. He hung his head. He did not know when the pariahs had gone. Darkness had fallen when he came to know that he was all by himself. Disgusted with his own person he began to walk about. He asked himself: When they touched it, we lost our humanity — they and me, didn't we? And we died. Where is the flaw of it all, in me or in society? There was no answer. After a long walk he came home, feeling dazed. (98-102)

After this novel I wrote my *Avasthe* which has a charismatic Shudra leader of the peasants. This was written after the Emergency. It is a political novel, but just not political. The novel gave me great satisfaction while I wrote it, for I have slowly moved in historical time and space too. Much of this novel takes place in an urban area. This novel too problematises many of my concerns ranging from the demands of the erotic life, the political challenge of our times and the spiritual realm. I feel that I am being pompous while I talk about my own work this way. My next two novels, *Bhava* and *Divya* are harder for me to describe. I revisit the world that I have described in my earlier works and try to discover aspects of that world in a new light of empathetic understanding.

On the whole I think that my writings are also a critique of religious life—a critique, but neither a condemnation nor a celebration. My *Bharathipura* and *Avasthe* are different kinds of critiques of modernity and tradition,

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even while they have other political meanings. "Only connect'" says E M Forster. I feel I am truly being creative when I go beyond my own opinions and am able to make unforeseen connections in the process of writing. This needs an alert kind of attention, which is another name for humility.

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In my high school days I used to meet in my mother's village a strange sadhu-like *samsari* who had travelled as a pilgrim all over India and knew Hindi and English but lived a simple life as the priest of a village temple. He also used to practice *aparigraha* in his own saintly householder manner. He used to walk me into the forest and as he got excited, used to sing bhajans like Ramakrishna Paramahamsa did. He made me read Vivekananda, Ramakrishna and Shivananda. He once gave me an English book of Shivananda. The hardbound copy had a newspaper cover. Out of my boyish curiosity I opened the cover and found ten rupees in it. I wondered why this man who never kept anything that he did not have any immediate use for, had kept this money. I pocketed it to test him and gave him back the book. He never asked me for that money. My theft and the secret of my theft, I used to think then, had saved me from becoming a mystic. The ten rupees I stole and the secret of it made me free myself from him. Otherwise, how could I have written my story "Ghatashraddha," a story of gratuitous violence against a pregnant, young widow and a sensitive boy?

Isn't gratuitous violence a part of all great religious systems of the world? How could this unworldly ecstatic Bhaktha ignore such realities? Yet he haunted me. Some twenty years ago I saw him sitting calmly, making *yajnopaveetha* spinning cotton with a simple device called *thakali* in his tiled-house in the village and he smiled at me as if I was the same boy he knew. I thought I would tell him of the theft and return the money but I did not. This incident is there in my *Bharathipura* with its own nuance.

I have continued to live with my political and religious concerns, my abhorrence of communalized religion, my socialist concerns in a globalizing world and also with the awareness that what we hate as globalized capitalism also contains what we desire secretly. We often live in bad faith in relation to the modern western civilization. I have been able to find a metaphor for this ambiguity in our souls in a story called "Sooryana Kudure" (The Horse for the Sun)

Let me tell you how I wrote this long story in the 1980s. I was

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reading the passage in Marx where he uses the term 'village idiocy'. Without conflict and without change in the mode of production and relations of production, history does not move forward for Marx. His seemed a challenge against what I stand for as a creative writer and also as a person who believes in Gandhian decentralization.

I was sitting in my well-lit room with my young daughter beside me. She saw a grasshopper in the room perched on a chair. She asked me what it was. I told her that we call it 'sooryana kudure'—the horse for the sun. Immediately I thought what a word for an insect—connecting the world of animals and the sun in the sky. Such a word in my language came from the world of peasants living the life of village idiocy. Suddenly I remembered many incidents in my boyhood, a student of astrology and a mystical worshipper of Devi who came to my father for instructions, the oil baths he gave to people he loved and his modern son who had waylaid the principal of a college and beaten him up. All these coalesced and became something else as I wrote the story. Such writing has labour as well as magic behind them. I always feel that I am writing well when I go beyond my opinions; then, incidents present themselves to me like gifts from an unknown source. This was my critique of modernization and globalization, and also, I hope, something more than that.

☆ ☆ ☆

I have constantly moved back and forth in time and space, (as I do in this recounting too). As a child in the jungle-surrounded lonely house, I had the first experience of death. In the middle of one dark star-studded night came four people walking the forest path with burning torches and woke us up. Bewildered, my grandfather opened the large, heavy, creaking door and I still remember the way he uttered the word 'Narayana' after he heard what the torch-carriers said. And then everyone was silent. Invoking the Lord Narayana, my grandfather had responded to the news of the death of my maternal uncle. The next day was the Deepavali festival and we were all prepared for the celebration of the festival with oil bath early in the morning.

The grief was unbearable for my mother. Just a few months ago, her brother had got married according to the wishes of my formidable grandfather and the uncle had died in his wife's house as he had gone there for his first Deepavali celebration after marriage. My mother began to blame my grandfather for this as he had got him married to an ill-starred girl. This was an irrationality both of them shared but as a child I suffered greatly, for I loved them both. I got all my mythological stories

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from my grandfather as he carried me on his shoulder while he went around gathering fuel or propitiating some village deity, as priest. The next Deepavali festival was sombre, because no one in the house had an early morning oil bath except me for I was still a child. I felt a strange grief and unease and after a hot bath I remember I ran out escaping my mother's eye—because, I was not supposed to go out in the chilly early morning with my wet hair.

I am still baffled by the memory of what happened. I looked up the sky faintly lighted by the distant, rising sun beyond the horizon hidden by the jungle. Did I see a flying angel-like object? I felt ecstatic and called out to my grandfather and mother and pointed at the flying object. They laughed at me. You had too much hot water on your head, they said.

What was it that I saw? And did I really see something? I still feel embarrassed to talk about this factually. My story "Karthika" deals with this, as such subjective experiences may be dealt with. The story is also about my rupture from my hated and loved traditional world when I got married outside my caste and religion.

I must be grateful to my readers today for their indulgence. This is a very personal account and such personal accounts matter only when there is a feeling of intimacy (*aapta vaakya*) between the speaker and the listener. Some years ago I would not have ventured to speak like this, for I believed then in Eliot's theory of impersonality. The man who suffers and the man who creates are different. Therefore, the writer is present in his work only as a catalytic agent. I like Eliot's humility and his suspicion of author-arrogance but I do not agree with him now. I feel now Blake was more profoundly right on this matter. Blake, and also Bendre in my language who uses the metaphor of a spider spinning out its own outer web from an inner substance, understand the sea-change of the creative process. 'Those are pearls that were his eyes/ of his bones are corals made.' A writer feels lucky and surprised when it happens. Then it would be possible for a writer to say with Blake 'this is mine yet not mine.' Have I been able to communicate such a feeling to my audience?

I can certainly share my fears and anxieties. A language is preserved by people who can speak only that language, whereas what we call now written literature is developed by people who know more than one language. There has always been a hegemonic relation between languages reflecting other hegemonies of state power and money power. But, this is to be noted—Samskruta was no threat in the past; a thousand years ago, Srivijaya of *Kavirajamarga* in Kannada could believe that a geographi-

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cally limited Kannada could have a distinct identity and also mirror the whole world. In a federal Indian Republic this was our hope too. We can be Indians without giving up our language and culture. But now the cosmopolite culture of the globalizing world is marginalizing Indian languages. Yes, they will not die, for there are still millions who live outside the cosmopolite civilization. But what is happening to these people who have given me my language and culture and a great tradition of poetry and story-telling? Their basic means of livelihood, agriculture, is slowly killed with peasants committing suicide and fertile areas are grabbed from them either violently or cunningly for creating special economic zones. The Indian languages are abandoned in the creation of knowledge, for they are not used as medium in good, expensive, private schools. There is a mushrooming of private schools of all sorts and even the poor, who want their children educated, sacrifice all their comfort to send their children to these English-medium schools. When writers like me fought against tradition and got attracted to the modern civilization, we did so innocently and even creatively. But will the Indian Bhashas survive as vehicles of creative thought and knowledge under the commanding presence of a globalized cosmopolite order? Do they have a future? Kannada literary history from its beginning had writers who were critical insiders and critiqued their traditional values. The saint poets of the 12th century and the Dasa poets later on empowered the Shudras and women. They never thought that they were an ethnic community to add colour to the larger world. They were themselves a world. People like me have written in Kannada thinking that we are a world in ourselves, and belong to the larger world too, not assertively, but unselfconsciously.

As a writer, in recent years, I have tried to make the self-reflexive nature of my writing—always so for many years, and perhaps more so now as I am getting old—take on other problems, the nature of truth of literature itself. My stories like "Jaratkaru", "Akkayya" and "Bete mattu Bale" – to name a few – are hard for me to describe. I would not have written them if I could have discursively talked about my preoccupations. I do theorize and talk a lot, a lot more than a writer should do, but when I fail to do so, if I am lucky, I write such stories or poems.

Despite the onslaught of globalization, and the mindless pursuit of wealth and fame, and attraction of everything western and fashionable, we still have creative writers among the young. For instance, there is real new writing – even experimental writing – by the Dalit writers. Some of them who can see their situation in a Buddhist spiritual framework have brought a new dimension to Kannada writing. Their *duhkha*, their

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compassion and their anger—expressed simultaneously—is a great contribution to Kannada writing. Some women writers, for whom the *nithya* and *shashwatha* (the now and the eternal) are not abstract separate categories, but an immediately felt experience, have extended our horizons of experience. Those who did not talk have begun to talk now.

Akka Mahadevi is not just a 12th century memory but a force active in the writing of many women poets. Basava of the 12th century again inspires Dalit writers along with Ambedkar and the Buddha. After the 12th century *vachana* poetry when people belonging to several castes expressed themselves in Kannada, our own times have several writers from different regions and castes of Karnataka. The 'backyard' of our civilization has emerged and become articulate in this ancient and yet modern language.

And they talk in their own way—with personal urgency. Surprisingly, some professional young people who are in the modern world system for a living have brought the cosmopolitan world and its problems into intense probe in metaphorically rich texts. A few of these live in the West but their childhood in villages and youth in small towns and education in common schools have helped them write some of our best short stories in recent years. I must say I encounter in them what I often wanted to do and could not do as well as them. In a living literary tradition, the writers exist as an organic community, and even the differences in attitude, philosophy and style help to enrich a single picture. I feel the same way about the writers of the past and the young writers who are articulating what I could not.

☆ ☆ ☆

I am grateful to a great organization like the Sahitya Akademi which helps nurture this feeling of the importance of all languages of India—the tribal languages included—in all the Bhasha writers of India.

☆ ☆ ☆

(Note: A rough version of this was orally delivered by me, as Sundararajan Visiting Professor, in the Centre for Contemporary Studies of the Indian Institute of Science as a lecture. –U.R.A.)

This lecture was delivered by Prof. U.R. Anantha Murthy as "Samvatsar Lecture" during the Festival of Letters of the Sahitya Akademi, in February 2007.

Ed.

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Manzoor Ahtesham

There have been a number of reasons which have prompted me to keep away from live interactions, the foremost being my hesitancy to separate my physical self from my written word and express myself in terms of meaningful abstractions. I have not been fortunate enough to choose literature as my educational career and my attempt into this domain has been more by the way of an accident. I do not have any oratorical skills and have tried to avoid occasions where making speech was a necessity I also do not know Hindi, Urdu or English, to the extent that I could talk meaningfully and fluently, fully convinced that I am able to reach you. I hold a breathing and attentive audience with trepidation and get overawed by it. It makes me cuckoo and I am not able to articulate the simplest of my thoughts. Lastly, I have held talking about myself in public in contempt. It has seemed an indulgence and indeed a very tiresome exercise. How I wish someone else could have done it for me.

Coming to the point, we are here this evening to meet the author Manzoor Ahtesham. He has just turned 59 on the 3rd of the current month, that is April. Belonging to Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, he has been writing short stories, novels and a couple of plays in Hindi. For those who may care to know, it may further be added, that by birth, he is a Sunni Muslim, at times claiming that he is a non-practicing such thing, who has not had the mental resourcefulness to conclude the deal and declare himself an atheist. Agnostic seems a more suitable word to approximate him. But that too, does not fully explain the dilemma of his being. Despite de Sade, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Hegel, Marx and so on, and a number of indigenous men of revolutionary thought and

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(Text of the speech the author made at the programme jointly organized by Sahitya Akademi and India International Centre on 9 April, 2007)

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action, his God is not dead yet. His favourite writer is Dostoyevsky, and favourite book, the same Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. He loves Premchand, Phaneeshwarnath Renu, Muktibodh and many others too. He has a great amount of love and respect for Ahimsa and Mahatma Gandhi, knowing fully well that life goes on, and people like Gandhi remain venerable not because they have been able to remove all the ugliness from it, but because they have attempted to do so.

Another, not entirely irrelevant side about the author is that his mother tongue is Urdu, he studied in English medium and chose Hindi to write his fiction, right from the outset. This decision dates back to his early school days, when his Hindi teacher, one Mrs. Jhanwati Mishra, was a big influence on him. Mrs. Mishra (later to be Dr. (Mrs.) Mishra) was an ardent Nirala-fan and a scholar. She stood for every thing Swadeshi in those, post-Partition, early years of 1950s. She remains a live memory with her handspun, white cotton sari and blouse, and a flashing red tika on her fair, broad forehead. Besides Nirala, she was a devoted Gandhi-bhakta and an admirer of Vinoba Bhave and whatever he was doing for the social and moral uplift of the country's have-nots, running movements like Sarvodaya and Bhoodan. In her class, following the pattern of Vinoba's Gramsevaks, there were teams of responsible class-sevaks, setting examples of model living and doing. The said author, needless to say, being prominent among them. Surprisingly, Mrs. Mishra could observe and appreciate the nuances in the written prose of a 4th and 5th class boy, and encouraged him to write every thing he felt like, in words that came naturally to him, irrespective of their Hindi or Urdu origin.

Such was the beginning, and those were the days.

Now, with all these 59 years added to my kitty, when I look back in order to comprehend, things do not seem to become any clearer. It only affirms that as a child, I was an extremely self-conscious, diffident, introverted boy, not at all interested in outdoor activities and games and with an addiction to read whatever I could lay my hands upon. I had my own foolish preferences and considered it beneath my dignity to become intimate with girls, first at home and later in school too. Shikar, in those days, was a craze in Bhopal, generally speaking, and in our family, in particular. I saw some thing ugly and sinister in that, but apart from killing animals, I enjoyed those summer nights under the starry sky, in the thick of forests, either in a jeep or a bullock-cart. I even tried to express my dislike for issues by writing in the only way I could; in the likeness of writers like Adil Rasheed, who besides being a regular visitor to Bhopal, was frequently published in the Urdu children magazine, *Khilona*,

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I also attempted to keep a regular, daily diary, the inspiration for which came from an elder cousin brother, who had a beautiful handwriting and chose to write with black ink. He was also fond of reading and writing, his all-time favourite being the Pakistani writer, Shafiqur-Rehman. He could also write poetry, with metre and rhyme, sang well, and had a fetish for cleanliness and personal hygiene. He had an ambition to become a film-star someday, some thing that was not to be real. He was kind to me, because of my interest in reading and presented me with some English title bought specially for me. Of course he always considered Shafiqur-Rahman and his humour to be something beyond my understanding appreciation.

Bhopal has been associated with poetry and poets: some important name like Iqbal who spent his time here on the invitation of the erstwhile rulers and Jigar Muradabadi, who came often to attend Mushairas and stayed for days with some of his fans. There were many others too. There were hosts of local poets and Ustads who practised poetry as an end in itself. There was an atmosphere — a *fiza* as they say—about poets and poetry in the Bhopal of my youth. Though fond of reading good poetry but strangely, I never attempted to write myself. There were a couple of poets in our family too, the foremost being my maternal uncle, who had studied in Lahore and was a colleague of Akhtar Shirani. He wrote in Persian. He wrote a long poem, welcoming the Shah of Iran and his Malika, when they visited India in the 1950s, and which was prominently published in the special issue of the Urdu-daily, *Inquilab* from Bombay. I loved poetry and also had a memory for it, but it was much later in my life that I could become friends with poets. That love for good poetry still persists with me, as also the lack of temptation to write poetry myself.

I am the fourth of a five children (four brothers, one sister) family, three of whom were elder to me and one, brother, junior to me. Abba, my father, was educated in the classical Muslim tradition of his time. He was a scholar of Arabic and Persian, also knowing Urdu well. His learning had much to do with religion and things connected with it— Quran, Hadith etc. Amma knew Quran and Urdu just well enough to initiate the children in their youth. None of the two had recourse to Hindi or English. Despite his qualifications, because of the changed realities of the day, Abba took to the timbre trade, established earlier by his father and elder brother. They were spartan, uneducated Pathans from the Frontier with no appetite for formal education, and had served the State army with some marginal distinction. Abba wanted his younger lot to be educated according to the fashion of the day, which, I can

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realize now, must have been difficult for him, both for the expenses incurred, and the breakaway from the main, as it must have seemed to the rest of the family.

Bhopal of those days was different from what it has come to be. There was only one English medium school meant for the socially higher ups, where I also did my bit of schooling. And the difference between the two worlds—home and school—was, to put it very mildly, stifling, and it added more to my already confused state of mind.

From the world of *Tales of Prophets* and casual mention of names like Saadi, Hafiz, Rumi, Ghazali, Ibne Khaldoun and some Urdu poets, and a life of strict orthodoxy, to Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Industrial and Frenth Revolutions, on to Nirala, Pant, Mahadevi, Maithlisharan, what to say of the Vedas, Upanishads and Kalidas, there simply was no respite. Then there were things which had happened in the near past, casting their shadows, like the Partition and constant mention of the big divide that existed between the Hindus and the Muslims. I heard it all, tried to understand but failed to make much sense of the issues.

School was a nice place and I soon found refuge in books—and reading, specially those not included in my course. It started with adapted classics and included things like *Sexton Blake*, *Sherlock Holmes* of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *David Copperfield*, *Jude the Obscure*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, a host of cowboy stuff popular at that time, till I reached a sort of a first milestone, with a book called *The Good Earth*. It seemed different and much nearer home. At around the same time, *Wuthering Heights*, with Heathcliff, struck with a deep thud. On to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess*, *Of Human Bondage*, *The Old Man and the Sea*. There were authors like Michele Arlene, James Michener, Leon Uris, George Eliot, and so many others who added to the pleasure of discovering the world and find one's own place in it. Premchand, Manto, Bedi, Yashpal, Krishen Chander, K.A Abbas, Mohammed Hasan Askari and of course, Agatha Christie in English and Iben Safi in Urdu, the odyssey continued.

I was a reasonably good student in class and getting good grades in examinations had never been a problem. In class VIII, I got the *Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and in my Higher Secondary (i.e. class XI), *War and Peace* of Tolstoy, as prizes for having secured 2nd and 3rd rank respectively. That was in 1964. Things were beginning to open up. I was enjoying getting under their skin. It could have become more meaningful and interesting had I not committed the blunder of choosing engineering as my educational career and decided to move to Aligarh, in order to pursue it. It was a disaster, twice over! I had never been good at my

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science subjects, and Aligarh University with its communally charged atmosphere was not a place that could have done anything for me. A year wasted, embittered, back to Bhopal—my pursuit for a degree in engineering, nevertheless, persisted, till there was no time left to repent. I finally quit without even having appeared for my final exams.

Such are the factors that make or mar the careers of enthusiasts, who do not have any seniors to guide them in the field. I cannot complain, because my family elders had no experience of the brave new world I was supposed to be a part of. They cannot be faulted for having trusted me rather blindly.

At that point of time when almost everybody had had enough of me, and even my own family—father, mother, brothers and sister could not hide their disappointment, there was nothing left for me to salvage from this world, nor was there any hope of salvation, in the other world. It was good. I had not read Herman Hesse's *The Prodigy* till then, or it could have had its own implications.

Through the thick and thin of all my wasted years, there was only one thing that never left me. And that was my love of reading and books. Though erratic, it never actually deserted me, either in college, or later, when I was sitting at a medical shop's counter, selling Aspro and Anacin. It was while sitting at this counter that I realized a certain pattern seeming to emerge around me. I was in the company of a host of entirely new faces who became my friends. Though I had tried to keep a daily diary since long and had corresponded with friends extensively, and also edited two magazines during my sojourn at the engineering college, it was at this medical shop, sitting at its counter, in 1972, that I wrote my first to be published story. The story, titled "Ramzan Mein Maut" was published in 1973. Some friends of those days survive to the day while others have taken leave.

Around the same time that my first story appeared, things in Bhopal started changing. It was because of the advent of a friendly IAS Officer who happened to be a poet and a critic. Ashok Vajpeyi does not need any introduction today for what he has done for culture, either in Bhopal (M.P.) or later in Delhi. Mr. Vajpeyi, thankfully, never took any interest in sponsoring me or my talents, but I feel thankful to him for the precious lot he did for arts and culture specially realizing the dream of Bharat Bhawan at Bhopal. It was the hub of the entire nation's cultural activity for quite sometime. It was because of Mr. Vajpeyi, in a way, that I could meet people like Nirmal Verma, Krishna Sobti, Krishna Baldev Vaid, Dilip Chitre, J.Swaminathan and B.V. Karanth in Bhopal. There were

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many more. Too many things in Bhopal have changed since then, but no one can deny Mr. Vajpeyi the credit that is rightfully his.

In my writing, I have mostly dealt with the Muslim experience in India's post-Independence, post-Partition, pluralistic, multicultural and secular society. The focus has been mainly on the contemporary issues and the locate, usually Bhopal, with its past and present. There has been no deliberate attempt on my part in doing so.

Through a city and its people, whom I seem to most intimately know, I have tried to talk of life and what seems universal in it to me. Muslim community and Bhopal are incidental to my narrative. Meaningfully incidental, I have realized over the length of time.

I have had a reasonably long innings of 34 years, writing. Writing whatever I have been able to, with changing times. I could have done better, or things could have been worse. I am not ambitious by nature, and well aware of my limitations. As it is, I feel fairly okay with myself and cherish the love that has come my way as a writer. It has enabled me to keep the company of those whom I respect and has given my family some valid reason to think well of me. That is a big bonus.

Life in the 21st Century, as we are well aware, is more complicated than ever before. More things seem to divide mankind in our times. That is, when we talk in terms of communities and countries. For an individual, I feel, life at all times is a saga of isolation, sometimes spiritual and at others, material. Saying that, I do not mean to generalize. Individuals can be generalized by someone at his own peril. We have our share of problems today and have to deal with them in order to survive. I share every genuine concern regarding the fate of humanity. It is being threatened by the same very institutions that were evolved in order to safeguard it. Religion and science both seem to be making common cause with that threat.

We have to stand up, to fight this threat, with the most effective weapons that we have at hand. Some pray— that too could be a weapon, let them do so.

I do not pray. Stopped it long since.

I just write.

So, I hope I will keep doing so.

❑

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Keki N. Daruwalla

Cuban Safari

Who in his senses wouldn't want to go to Cuba—land of hope and guerilla glory in the sixties—of Fidel and Che and Raul, the triumvirate that threw the rotten regime of Batista in the dustbin. Also the land where John F. Kennedy floundered (the CIA bungled it, but the President carried the can) with the misadventure which goes by the name of the Bay of Pigs—in Spanish *Bahia de cochinos.* (This place on the coast got its name because two to three centuries earlier pirates used to land here and hunt for pigs). Then of course there was the nuclear standoff. One knew Cuba was the biggest island in the Caribbeans. (Incidentally, etymologically, the latter word derives from the Spanish *Caribe,* which means cannibal! That's what the Spaniards thought of the "natives" of the western Indes. And how come some of our language writers love the term 'nativism' so much?) Cuba is also known for its music and cigars, not forgetting its rum. Literature-wise, Cuba may not be too well known, but it is the land of Alejo Carpentier whom I have admired for long; and of course Hemingway stayed here for over two decades, fishing and writing, before eventually blowing his brains out.

So, one accepted with alacrity a chance to go there. The delegation consisted of Om Thanvi, the rock solid editor of *Jan Satta*, Mamta Sagar, the diminutive Kannada poet, Y.K.Sinha (alias Bharat Bhardwaj), best known for his numerous translations into Hindi and Nusrat Zahir, the writer of humorous pieces in Urdu and editor of that massive Quarterly journal called *Adabsaaz.*

Cubans do things in style. First of all they see to it that the entire Latin America is present at their conferences. The "5th International Congress on Culture and Development" was no different. Every country from South and Central America was represented by writers. All the countries in the Caribbeans sent their delegations. Sri Lanka sent its Culture minister, the distinguished Mr. Samarasinghe. The subject of the conference was

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"Defending Cultural Diversity". One guessed what one would be in for—a tirade against the "homogenization of culture," which of course means American culture. Latin America is not particularly in love with President George Bush. Though the USA was hardly ever named, we knew where the barbs were pointed.

There was obviously much more to it. As the manifesto stated, "in a planet diminished by globalization, the voices of the excluded people begin to be listened to." The manifesto did rightly emphasize the right of the 'autochthonous' people to preserve their life-styles and language. It stood up for Afro-descendants and their claim to an identity profile and a place in society. It approved "women and homosexuals" fighting "for the elimination of discriminatory barriers." (Speaking of women and homosexuals in the same breath left me uneasy). It also pointed out how "the South is becoming the North with the uncontrollable power of migrations."

The topics at the congress were numerous—from the contribution of Cuban music to Jazz, to papers on tongues and oral traditions, many of them located in spaces where diversity was threatened, to "Global networks, industries and cultural diversity." One topic was "Clash of Civilizations, or Dialogue among Themselves" etc. When it came to languages and oral traditions, each speaker mentioned thirty to forty languages in their regions. My understanding of the situation was that they were enumerating the tongue of each tribe in their area. When it came to our turn to speak, I made it clear that the twenty four languages we were talking about, boasted of a cornucopia of literature and some of the languages like Tamil had a history going back to two and a half millennia. I also made it clear that while our great epics rode on the back of Sanskrit, they percolated down to the masses (and folklore) through other languages and dialects. Sanskrit and Prakrit went hand in hand as classical and folk. Buddhism was exported to Sri Lanka and South East Asia on the back of Pali. I also took pains to point out that linguistic states were not just important to showcase our diversity but were the bedrock of our polity. Each of our languages not only had a literature of its own, but also culture, its individual dance form, folk music etc. All this needed to be told to the audiences because awareness of things Indian is a bit peripheral in the region.

It was pointed out by speakers that there were twenty-five different African groups in Cuba—this could perhaps apply to the entire Caribbean. The Cuban heritage was the result of a triangular relationship between America, Africa and Europe. There were workshops on Cuban music,

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which is very alive and has made its own contribution to Jazz. Cuba after all was and is entangled in diverse cultures—the Afro-Cuban, the hip-hop, and while borrowing from Jazz has also contributed to it.

The Corniche at Cuba is lovely—much less crowded than the Marine Drive. The oldest fort in America, and beautiful to look at, is also situated right on the Corniche which is called The Malecon. We met the stocky mustachioed Iroel Sanchez, President of the Cuban Book Institute. The Institute was very eager to translate into Spanish and publish an anthology of Indian short stories. They wanted the rights to be given exclusively to Cuba. They asked for books reflective of contemporary Indian literature. They also wanted poetry and an anthology of essays (historical or literary). They asked for a systematic presence of Indian writing in Cuba, writing which they could translate into Spanish, and publish.

This needs to be followed up by the Akademi. Only this way will our literature reach out to Latin America.

We met and had a long session with the most famous Cuban poet Roberto Fernandez Retamar. He is also the President of Casa de las Americas. To quote a few lines from his poem, "The Other—January 1, 1959"(that's the day when Batista fell).

> And so we survive
> And owe our survival to whom?
> Who was it who died for me in his cell,
> Took my bullet, the one
> Meant for me, in his heart?
> I live through whose death?
> Whose bones are locked with mine?
> Whose ripped-out eyes
> Are looking through my face?

That is fairly conformist poetry about the revolution, but Retamar has risen above it in the rest of the volume. Among the younger poets is Dania Rodriguez Alfonso. Her book *Omnipresencia* has been translated into English, and she is there on the Internet. But in Havana no one seemed to have heard of her. Here are excerpts from her poem "Origin": Perhaps love poetry doesn't receive state patronage.

> I have in my hair
> black cowries and
> eyes of honey.
> I was born of the
> jungle, vegetable
> creole,

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in the fresh memory
of thirsty nights
made of nocturnal
mint
and dawn caimitos.

Shhhh...let it sound,
hear a black song.
Sing...
hear my black
jungle,
forest, destiny,
song.

We were taken to Hemingway's villa, saw his hunting trophies and his motorboat. When he died, Fidel Castro came to the house, and when his wife asked if she could carry away his unfinished manuscripts, Castro readily agreed. Hemingway left his house and its effects to the Cuban state. We were also taken to the Revolutionary Square and Jose Marti's Memorial Museum. Marti is the hero of the 1895 war of Independence against Spain, when Cubans threw off the Spanish yoke. Marti is treated as a father figure. As a Cuban intellectual told me, "he is the Gandhi of Cuba."

A word about our embassy. Every member of the embassy was helpful and considerate. The Ambassador, the beautiful Mrs. Mitra Vasisht, was very gracious, spoke Spanish as fluently as the Cubans, and organized a poetry reading at her house, where the marching poet, Mamta Sagar was a hit.

The Cuban economy is not in the best of shapes. Two currencies prevail. (Hundred US dollars fetch you 80 Cuban Pesos). Professionals, even doctors, earn a pittance. The country hasn't kept pace with globalization and the West thinks it is caught in a time warp. But it is a great island, fun-loving people proud of their country and culture, and their Independence from the United States.

Note : Keki N. Daruwalla was a member of the Sahitya Akademi delegation that participated in the Fifth International Congress on Culture and Development held in Havana, Cuba from 10th to 17th June, 2007.

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Struga

Struga poetry evenings are famous all over continental Europe. Struga is a small lake town in Macedonia where poetry is a creed. When I was first invited there in 1985, Macedonia was a part of Yugoslavia. Each year one well-known poet is feted and awarded. Yannis Ritsos, the splendid Greek poet, was awarded the golden wreath that year. He was as good as the national poet of Greece, had spent years in jail each time the colonels took over. In 1948 he was arrested and sent to an island prison where he was subjected to torture. In 1967 he was arrested again after the military coup and his poems were burnt in front of the Temple of Zeus.

It was an honour to be with and read one's poems with Ritsos. But for his leftist leanings, he was a fit candidate for the Nobel Prize. His poem "Epitaphios" is still the sepulchral lament sung in Greek Orthodox churches on Good Friday. It is a poem lamenting the death of striking tobacco workers killed in a ruthless police firing. Twelve were killed and over a hundred injured. His poetry was "rooted in the earth of national tragedy." It was very lyrical, though in translations it didn't appear so. He had to hide the political content of his poems, and so he hid the tragic elements of his poetry behind a mask of impassivity. For instance, he says in a poem "The Girl who Found Her Sight"

> "Ah—she says - I see again. All these years my eyes
> were strangers to me,
> they'd sunk in me; they were two mouldy pebbles
> in dark thick water—black water. Now
> isn't that a cloud? And this a rose?"

Obviously the lines are about a girl seeing the world after the military rule was over and waking up to a sense of freedom, and being in a position to appreciate its visual delights.

This year it was Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet who won the wreath. He writes in Arabic and so the flights of fancy are different and so are the metaphors which sometimes tread dangerously close to the hyperbole. For instance take these opening lines from his poem "Psalm 9."

> O rose beyond the reach of time and the senses
> O kiss enveloped in the scarves of all the winds
> surprise me with one dream
> that my madness will recoil from you

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Or take these lines from "Psalm 3"

On the day when my words
were earth...
I was a friend to stalks of wheat.

On the day when my words
were wrath
I was a friend to chains.

On the day when my words
Were a rebellion
I was a friend to earthquakes.

He ends the poem neatly though

But when my words became
honey..
flies covered
my lips!

(Translation by Ben Bennani)

Darwish is an icon in the Arab world, and has gone back to Ramallah, where he stays, though he could have easily stayed in Paris like the Syrian poet who goes by the pen name, or *takhalus*, of Adonis. Darwish was born in the village of Barweh in Galilee, a village which was razed to the ground by the Israelis. In later life he became a member of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) of Arafat. He went into exile in Egypt and worked for the famous paper *Al-Ahram*. It is of interest that both the poets mentioned by me struggled against the political currents of their time and kept their integrity.

But this piece is not about poets; it is about Struga. The poetry evenings are held in honour of two brothers who were compiling the folklore and music of Macedonia in the 19th century. The Turks who controlled the country, considered this a spark of burgeoning nationalism and scotched it. They arrested the brothers, took them to Turkey and executed them.

The main recital takes place on the bridge from where the river Drim emanates from a huge lake. The Macedonian hills are beautiful. In 1985 this place looked like a village. Today it is a thriving hill resort with lovely hotels. Macedonia was just a province in 1985. Even Skopje, the country's capital, looked like a provincial town. I remember finding great difficulty in locating the Railway station which was the epicentre of the devastating 1963 earthquake. The Turk Town was smelly. Today

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it is a thriving city dotted with museums and lovely buildings. In 1985 most of the hundreds of monasteries which dot the Macedonian hills, were without monks. I remember the Finn poet Risto Ahti refusing to step out of the bus and go to a monastery where the hymns were on tape—there were no monks. Those old Communist nostrums are fast fading and people are thronging to the monasteries, which now play a partly tourist and partly religious role.

We heard some good poetry—for instance from Carolyn Forche of USA who has also translated Darwish and the fine French poet Robert Daisnos. I still remember a fantastic line about a "carpet hanging from sorrow's balcony". We heard some fine poetry from Nikola Madirov, a young Macedonian poet. But there were quite a few poets whose work was contained in thin booklets. The Iranian poet Zara Houshmand, who has lived most of her life in USA, had a splendid poem and so had the Irish poet Mary O'Malley. The organizers remembered Meena Alexander who had been here a year earlier. Hardly anyone remembered Agyeya, who had won the golden wreath a year or so before Ritsos. Indian poets are not too well represented at this tremendous festival. We heard poets from Iceland, Lithuania, Denmark, France, Azerbaijan, Turkey, the Netherlands and Austria among other countries. Quite a few of the poems sounded pretty ordinary and were disappointing.

A word about the organizers. Zoran Ancevski, a fine poet himself, Eftim Kletnikov, and their team managed things without a falter.

We read at quite a few places and our poems were translated into Macedonian and read out by some of their best actors, like the well-known Dmitri who had a terrific presence. Since Darwish was present I read out, among other poems, my poem "To a Palestinian Poet" which I had written in Damascus, and was especially addressed to Darwish. People thought it was rather brave to read this to Darwish, but one has never shied away from putting one's point across.

As a fellow poet I condone your excesses—
'measuring the sky with chains',
a blood drop looking for a wound.'
Let's have less of blood,
both in poetry and on the ground.
Let peace descend on you and your neighbouring people.
They too have had a two thousand year old exile.
I pray that they never drive your children into the desert
and may your children never drive them into the sea.

3rd October, 2007

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Jogamaya Chakma

The War Dress

On a stormy night
As stars come off
Remains awake
The grief-stricken dew of *paus*
Inside the grass
Bleeding hilly Khumpui in your eyes
Who is the lady in upstream of Haora
With splashing sounds
Moving away into dense forest?
No peace is there, its told, in that forest also
In trees after trees, in creepers after creepers
In roots after roots
There are diseases,
Of sabotage and pangs of uprootings
My poet, from your body
Even for a moment
You could not put off
The war dress.

Translated from Chakma by Mihir Deb

The Illegal Goods of the Market

(1)

If illegal goods do not come to the market,
The market does not flourish it is told,

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Having come to buy dreams for livelihood
He who has become an absconding criminal,
I need him.
In this market I roam around
In search of him.

(2)

Women are valuable goods in the market
Women's relation with men
Are most bought and sold
The market rates of the day are in the news
When food comes in dressed up dishes
The market hots up
All the relations of human beings then
Are put for auction—yes
Even the poems and their bodies.

Translated from Chakma by Mihir Deb

Relation

1

Hidden inside the stone
Like secret water
Between you and me
What is the relation
What's its name I don't know.
To spoil this water
Came here also the hunter
And spilled blood
But even that did not cause
Any stain.

2

Since I love
Unconditionally or with life at stake,

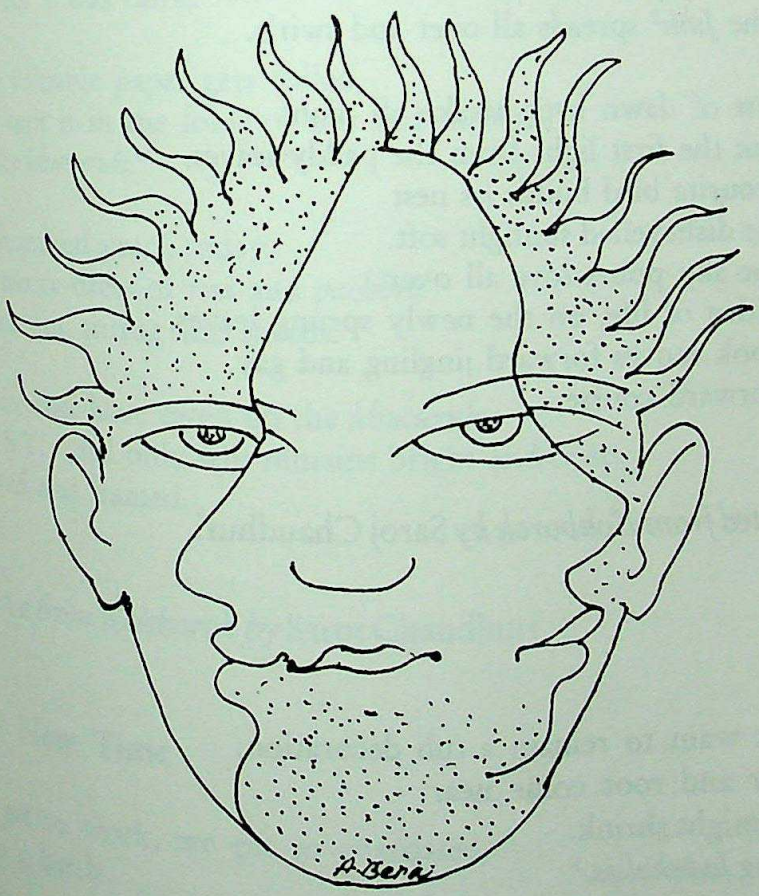
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For my depth
And unbridgeable width
You need not go to any sea
In search of your existence
Needn't go to any fire
Which lies in the depth of existence
In realization and faith
I am that fire of self-confidence.

Translated from Chakma by Mihir Deb

❑



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Shefali Debbarma

Wind Among the New Leaves

The wind whistles a note and sings,
Rushes over the meadow in abandon;
The paddy plants swing and hold the hand
Of that wintry breeze. The smell of *Mamita*[1]
From the *Jum*[2] spreads all over and swirls.

The mist of dawn kept awake all night
To drink the first light from the paddy leaves.
The favourite bird builds its nest
With the dishevelled sunlight soft.
The blue sky pours love all over
The garden of life, on the newly sprung leaves.
The brook moves forward jingling and gay,
In its forward course.

Translated from Kokborok by Saroj Chaudhuri

Liberty

I do not want to remain a tub decoration,
If flower and root come near
The sky might shrink.
I shall sing *Jadukolija*.[3]
I shall no longer shed my tears in the tub

1. *Mamita*: festival celebrating new harvest.
2. *Jum*: shifting(terrace) cultivation.
3. *Jadukolija*: traditional tribal songs of ancient origin.

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Of the moon with those drops.
But smear the face
I'll create designs on the *risa*[4] for my ownself
Or I shall decorate that tree in the forest
Which speaks about the sky
And goes naked.

Translated from Kokborok by Ashes Gupta

Lamination

The Scheduled Tribe Certificate card
Was issued under seal and signature
Of the Sub Divisional Officer,
In the year I was born.

Lest the valuable paper gets soiled,
Mother kept it in the folds of *risa* and *pachhra*,[5]
Within the *khuturuk*.[6]

After a hundred years, today,
The favourite dress of *risa* and *pachhra*
Has worn out, turing into shreds.

The white ants have eaten up the *khuturuk*;
But the S.T. Card only still remains bright and crisp,
Laminated and framed.

Translated from Kokborok by Saroj Chaudhuri

O, My New Time

As we get to work, we get so engrossed,
As if in a battle.

4. *risa*: bustier.
5. *pachhra*: cloth worn like long skirt by women.
6. *khuturuk*: cane basket for storing cloths and garments.

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We do not look up to the face of Time
Nor to the colour of the crop.
The small gardens of our household gossips
Echo the lonely crickets' note.

Yellow mildew grows on the green leaves of my mother-tongue;
Our songs get lost in their tour of the capital,
In the euphoric 'Eh-hu-hu' tune, at Kaman Choumohani.[7]
The idle cannon listens to it lying,
Neighbouring foreign liquor shop claps in applause.

Ravished by clashes and by love,
Our yard lies exhausted.
Our *risa* and *pachhra* billow in the gust
On the town-hall stage;
They could not recognise me. As if
We have not met for ages.

Translated from Kokborok by Saroj Chaudhuri

Singing at Midnight

The bubbling unruly river at Dumboor
Has been tamed and held captive by slashing the hills.
Men who live by the jum
Respond to the call of their bellies
In the dry river-bed crowded by boulders lying upside down.

Garland of coins, a bunch of paddy from the hills,
Favourite *sarinda*[8], the *tong-ghar*[9]
Are all silent in the Raima sagar.
At the moment of sinking in, at the time of surfacing,
Seeing the glad sunrise,
Watching the bright moon,

7. Kaman Choumohani: The central point in the capital city of Agartala, where an ancient cannon stands. A trade centre. Choumohani means 'cross-roads'.
8. *sarinda*: folk musical instrument
9. *tong-ghar*: watch-hut on stilts

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The forest breezes blew;
And flying about, the eggs became hen.

Words have multiplied with the extinction of forests
And sleepless are the long nights.
Now at midnight,
Blood sings in the network of my veins.
I listen to my beating heart intently
And on touching, feel my shoulders.

Translated from Kokborok by Ashes Gupta

Since I Am a Woman

Insects have feasted on the *yakhtom*,[10]
I cannot weave clothes;
But I feel like designing patterns,
Since I'm a woman.
When the new paddy arrives during *Mamita*
My friends become ecstatic,
My voice lacks tune,
Yet, I want to sing
Since, I'm a woman.

When the seven hills doze off
When the seven rivers dry up,
With a *langa*[11] full of dreams
I have to spread myself all over
Since, I'm a woman.

Translated from Kokborok by Ashes Gupta

❑

10. *yakhtom*: footrest for maintaining pressure while weaving.
11. *langa*: cane or bamboo basket hung from the back

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Anju Narzari

While Crossing a River

I wasn't aware whether
My heart was leaping with happiness or I was
Staring at the gloomy image of my face in the river
Suddenly, the River-god took me away
Somewhere deep inside

There was not a single boat on the bank of the river
Innumerable strange orbits of dragonflies disappeared
In the quiet air of moonlit night

I was swimming relentlessly as golden and silver fish
With shoals of 'Elenga' fish of hopes
In the sea of sorrow and happiness

My happiness and sorrows became water-borne
Diving carelessly, drowning, swimming back-strokes
And the colours of life floating lazily
As if forgotten to be fetched.

The lamps were burning dimly at distant villages
As if only for the sake of burning

I forgot
I forgot to bring a coin with me
And pairs of betel nut and leaves
As offering for the River-god while crossing the river
I forgot to carry a knife made of iron
Along with me to ward off evil spirits

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Perhaps for these reasons
The River-god was unhappy with me
Or may be he caught me off guard...

I didn't realize how much water I swallowed
I didn't know whether the fish
Came to know the state of my heart
And told everybody about it—the crabs,
The snails, the hyacinth, the storks, gulls and eagles

And the moon....
Did it know my sorrow and happiness?

Time stopped for a while to talk to the moon
And the stars whispered fairy tales to it

I did not bother to know whether a star was
Dying or born at some distant corner...somewhere

Drenched with water for so long, perhaps
My heart became colourless, shapeless like water
And melted and flowed like a river

The unseasonal shower of sorrow soaked
My purple coloured *dokhna*....

In life, we cross so many canals, drains,
Rivers, seas and oceans of sorrow and happiness.

Ask Me Not How I Am

(For all the suffering women of the world)

Ask me not how I am
What, if I am a living dead
Embracing the corpse of dreams
Or got drowned in soul's blood-soaked water

No, never ask me, no

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if sorrow strikes or damp air makes me sick
What if my days wither away
For want of free air under the blue sky
or lay rotting like a dead spring waiting for a flow
or the soul sighs groping for means.

Do not ask me
If life's joyful rainbow is dashed by storm
If tsunami has drowned half of my heart
Do not ask me about them.

Do not ask to know
Why I can not fly with birds
Why I can not join the chorus of stars

Do not pry into my sorrows
It's a sorrow of all
It's a sorrow of the world
It's a sorrow of all women
Of Sita, Draupadi, Urmila, Joymoti,
Mamoni, Anupama, Taslima and Kamala.

It's an ancient sorrow
As old as the earth
Like the primordial love, feelings and forgiveness
And the ancient womb of mother and her experiences.

Do not try to know
It's a bolt from the blue sky
A smite that leaves no mark
On body but in soul.

Only do try to guess it
How cold and hard is a frozen tear
How long is the sigh of sorrow so deep

Try to know it
My heat is broken and dead
But being draped in violet *dokhna**
Still makes me beautiful

---

* traditional dress of Bodo women

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And try to know
The garland of docility and sacrifice
Oh, how cumbersome!

Do not try to know
How I borrow my soul's parched sands
Looking for an ocean
Or keep digging the grave for my sorrow

Do not try to know
How I pass the sleepless nights—
With tears or sigh

Do not ask me either
How I write my songs of sorrow—
With blood or tear

I do not know
Why the path of life is so full of spikes
Why the heart has to hold so much travails

It's perhaps I look miserable,
That poetry dotes on my soul.

I do not know
Might there be a birth of the War Goddess
With her ten hands to destroy savagery?
Or at the repeated pyre-test
Will the heart of the Earth rent apart?
Or will there be Taslima-Kamala preaching Jehad?

What I know is—
Lotus springs from the mud
A grieving soul has its beauty
Joy can be achieved on sharing

Ask me not how I am

My protest is—
Why should I undo life's knots as a woman?
Why?

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Why should woman alone knit the thread of relationship?
Or do stains of rape stick to their body and soul alone?

My protest is—
To which God should I seek justice
or is there still a God to rescue my bleeding soul?

I have no fears in being an ocean of sorrow
or a necklace of sorrow to deck my own collar

I have no fear to be a world of sorrow
Where the agony of creation will blossom the Jacaranda

I have no fear
to be a poetry of endless sufferings

I can beautify my gloomy sky
With the faded colours that my grandmothers wore on their souls.

Translated from Bodo by Sickna John Wary

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Lalnunpuia Hrahsel

Ode to Young Buds

The precious joys you emit, the fondly-look you bear,
Yet a bud in the obscurity of hidden blossom soon to bloom;
Like the fondest-offspring a floral bud to yawn open,
Each sepal and petal bursts open with all pleasing senses;
Painted lush green its stems fully adorned
Keeping them safe from all harm and adversity.
Budding of mankind is aptly youth's
That gathered all charm and delight;
Yuck! Let them be guarded against offence and harm,
Lest pruned or plucked—to them let it wither and die;
In any with pure God-fearing hearts
Let it be bountiful, blooming all the days of their lives.
Budding youth—the whorl of our Ethnic dream team,
Onward we march—just to a narrow-morrow Right-Path.

Translated from Mizo by the Poet

Ode to the Moon

Gone the Sun down in the yonder west
A nightly Queen—a crescent Moon peeps across the east
Winking her eyes with seductive attire
Rays of her beauty streak across my home sweet home
and over a village banyan-tree
Blurring her beams over the virgin hilly-greeneries
Where the elegant harts and fawns dearly play.
For the sweat-bathed strenuous labourers—
She provides peaceful, replenishing rest hours;
Indeed, she often leads mankind to quiet streams,

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Indescribable messages she carries in sentimental nostalgia,
With a resonant romance beneath her emotional bosom;
Spellbinds us all she to an ideal Dreamland.
For all creatures she's a Pole-star,
A pathfinder for the clumsy fowls and birds of the air
In your moonbeam—the owlets and crawlers of all kinds
Graze in your grace for survival with their young ones—
Fates of them to miss the outshining glory of the Lamb of God,
Still then, you're to them the shining gems of sardius and the jaspe!
A reflexive-blessing you get from the flaming-torch of the Creator,
Could you tell me the secret of your hidden glories—
Reveal in me the hidden-hearts of mankind thro' your speechless emotions;
Make me perceive the reasons we untiringly sing Praises!
Oh Queen-like one, Pathfinder of all Creation in their divers ways,
Longingly, You are truly the Moonbeam overhead!

Translated from Mizo by the Poet

Attraction

A thing *winsome*—invisible in us but that cleaves,
Speaks at hearts, in deep infatuation is 'Greeing Attraction'.
A thing *elegant*—each and every youth possesses,
None with eyes but visually perceived.
A thing—glaringly sighted merely betwixt the erotic couple,
That cryptic charm—pin-pricked thro' the hearts
Clearly ogles its agreeable fantasies—assuredly reflexed in smiley romance.
A thing of *fascination*, though that is obscure,
Yet its beauties, virtues, charities
Cut deep as it impales through the clear insights,
That permeate minds and souls as a whole.
It's often liken'd to an ankle-deep shallow puddle,
Deeper it reaches and measures—as empirically proven!
Bewitching Secret that does so much attract,
As it sends sinews deep down the spine of mankind,
It captivates sights, and as well hearts—
That leads us to an incredible overflowing joyance,
Which sets us aflame into a perfect satisfaction.

Translated from Mizo by the Poet

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Nungshitombi and I

Sudhir Naoroibam

In our childhood days both Nungshitombi and I played freely, not a shred of clothing on our bodies, swimming, diving in the river; happily.

She is a fast runner. And spirited. What I perform she also can. Sometimes we fight. I pull her hair to uproot it. She bites. No one gets the upper hand. But we are never apart. We move together; I lead the way sometimes, she also does the same.

We foray to pluck fruits from other homesteads. She is crazy after fruits. Once the owner was after us. We fled. But she could not run fast enough. That day she was dressed in a *phanek*[1]. She used to tell me that one cannot run fast when dressed in *phanek*.

I said, "Nungshitombi, carry the *phanek* in your hand and run. Otherwise that man will catch you surely."

She did it. Then both of us ran ahead of the wind. The owner slackened. He remained much behind. Unable to catch us. We both panted mightily. Worn out entirely were we. Laughed also heartily.

I said, "You escaped by hair's breadth from the owner; why you should come wearing a *phanek*, I don't know."

"Mother tells me to wear it. Scolds me terribly for not putting on *phanek*."

"But why?"

"I don't know!"

Then on she was always in the habit of wearing *phanek*. Afterwards I went by myself to steal fruits. She started to stand behind at a distance, only looking at me, waiting for me to bring fruits to her. She is not used to waiting and looking on. But she did it. She began to bank upon

1. Phanek: traditional dress of Manipuri women.

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me for further services too. She is unable to do many things that she could do in the past. She is not a whit lesser than me. I churned within myself as I thought she had become lazy. I was furious towards her. Rebuked her. A couple of times plucked her hair also. But she did not bite me. She seemed to have weakened all over suddenly. Is it due to her *phanek* or her mother, I could not tell. Don't know, who has weakened her so and made her so inactive!

We played at building sand-castles on the river bank. And then levelled them. Did not know the difference between creation and destruction. We both understood how to play only. The pleasure from playing only. The pleasure was there in creating and destroying. We both thought of only today, today's pleasure alone.

But she remarked quite unseemingly, "Let's stop breaking it! Are houses built to be broken?"

"Then what should we do?" I asked, "Should it be left behind like this?"

"Let's save them. We have to play tomorrow again. Let's save them for tomorrow."

She brought up first the matter of tomorrow. Spared them for the morrow. It was given a name 'Morrow's Home'. Many new ones were also built—they also turned into Morrow's Homes. How pretty-looking are the houses. Started recollecting the destroyed ones. Quite numerous they would have been if they were to remain! How nice it would be! A strange feeling of delight was felt, of creation, of tomorrow. But we don't know how long the many tomorrows are going to preserve our sand-castles.

A moonlit-night she played Radha. Dressed in the costume of *potloi*[2] she danced before the spectators. I felt smothered seeing her. Burdened with the ornaments on her head, neck, hands, hampered by the *potloi*, she had moved so slowly, weakly, looking so uneasy.

I asked Mother, "Mother, wouldn't Nungshitombi feel tired?"

"Why should she? Do you count tiredness while dancing? Do you feel tired while playing? Look, how beautiful she looks!"

Being beautiful! Is that what they call beauty? I disagree. It might be so beautiful but she shouldn't put on *a potloi*. I won't, really. She must be feeling tired. Nungshitombi should be very tired.

"Mother, will she put on her *potloi* tomorrow also?"

"She won't. When the dance is over, she won't use it."

"Will she never use it?"

2. Potloi : customary costume used by a female performer in the Manipuri *Rasa* form of dance and also used by a Meitei bride.

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"For once, only when she gets married."

When she gets married! My sister too got married dressed in a *potloi*. She went away leaving us. I was very sad.

Next morning I ask, "Nungshitombi, are you happy dancing? Don't you get tired in the *potloi*?"

She did not answer. I questioned her repeatedly.

"Tell me, were you tired? Or happy? It wasn't delightful, was it, Nungshitombi, wasn't it tiresome? You are not used to walk slowly also? Yes, you also do not like that."

She never answered.

"Come on, let us run." I pulled her upwards, by her hands. "You start first. Wherever your hands touch will become the goal! Oh what, you be the winner too. But race let us, and fast!"

She did not agree, she walked out quietly lowering her head. And then I broke all the sandcastles. Our Tomorrow's Homes. Very angrily.

Mother tells me, "How can boys and girls play together!"

Translated from Manipuri by B.S. Rajkumar

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Kunwar Narain: Eight Fruitful Decades

Girdhar Rathi

September 19, 2007 saw Kunwar Narain turn eighty. These eighty years, marked by serious interests, creativity, and devotion to ideas, should do any Hindi-lover proud. The essays and articles comprising *Kunwar Narain: A Presence* are proof enough. The collection is important in that readers spanning three or three-and-a-half generations enter into a serious dialogue with the man and his work.

In Kunwar Narain, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no unsettling disjunction between his 'suffering' and his 'creative' self. His writing has a classic bent, not the romantic. This often leads to an impression of an exaggerated severance between the writer and his work. But his classic impersonality doesn't cramp the personal stamp on his writings. Taste, simplicity, decency, and firmness of mind (not the bigoted variety) marking his daily behaviour are no less visible in his diction and style.

The eightieth birthday reminds one naturally of the remarkable variety of Kunwar Narain's oeuvre. His epic or perhaps long narrative poem *Chakravyooh* came in 1956 followed by four or five collections of short stories, a collection of critical articles and translations of Cavafi, Borges, and several other foreign poets. Also he had been associated with well-known magazines like *Yug Chetna*, *Naya Prateek* and *Chhayanat*. Then, he has a collection of some rare or hardly accessible classical recordings by the musicians and musicologists who happened to visit him at Lucknow. Narain's personal library and collection of films also cut the same grade. One must not forget that some of his articles on world cinema could be used as touchstones by film critics.

Free from self-advertisement, Kunwar Narain is yet a much-bedecked writer who in the last two decades has attracted a number of foreign scholars and writers. Quite a few of his works have been turned into Italian, Polish, English and possibly French during the last few years.

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Sedate and unruffled in life, Narain's 'world' is yet full of tension and internal contradiction—part reason perhaps for his eager acceptance in the West also.

A one-line manifesto for Kunwar Narain's poetry might run 'War against Dehumanization'.

It is no mere coincidence that war is Kunwar Narain's central metaphor. His first book of poems was titled, as already stated, *Chakravyooh* (the word means a strategic formation blocking all exits except the one heavily guarded), followed by *Atmajayi* (Self-conqueror), and *Amne Samne* (Eyeball to Eyeball). Some of the seventeen stories collected in *Akaron ke Aspas* have titles like 'Doubtful Moves', Misgiving', 'A Fight Between Two Men', 'The Edge of a Knife', and ' Mughal Empire and a Water-carrier'.

War in its various shades pervades, directly or indirectly, practically all the important poems by Kunwar Narain. Words and images like victory-defeat, confrontation, attack, or hunt, help him untangle a number of knotty situations while their frequency startles the reader. His stories enable him to underline the importance of studying power psychology. His poetry does the job with an even more concentrated force.

In his introduction to *Akaron ke Aspas* Kunwar Narain remarks, "These stories often use characters and events as a mere backdrop against which the case of human destiny is presented." Almost like the metaphor of war, the court too is a central metaphor. Even where explicit war is missing, there's an endless series of courts, cages, locks, surveillance, patrol, or imputed crimes.

Kunwar Narain's poet is involved in a "struggle to live" but the struggle in our age is doomed to become a queer and furtive attempt to live." The attempt to "keep oneself alive as a dignified human being" is a different kind of 'war' graphically present in his poem 'He Never Slept'. This struggle for life takes place in one's immediate present. However, it is not committed to the 'moment' or the philosophy of universal flux. Of course no poet escapes the pressure of contemporaneity, least of all Kunwar Narain in whom the pressure is quite obvious. But the confrontation with his age moves him on, basically, to an examination of history. The question of human destiny engages him in the context of past, present, and future. The metaphors of war and the court are embedded in the idea of man—humanity, in fact—and gather their specific meanings from the larger contexts of history. This is why a perfunctory notice of these metaphors and ideas fails to deliver a firm image of Kunwar Narain's 'man'. 'He' obviously wants a closer look.

Even if involved for millennia in a desperate struggle to give some

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'human' content to his life, this 'man' isn't aggressive. Even if he betrays an occasional streak of pugnacity, it's the response of a cornered animal. He fights not because he is fired by a royal ambition. If he were, he could have easily followed some 'right' or 'left' totalitarian regime. He is not only not power-hungry, but also sees the hollowness of a personal victory right from the beginning.

An acute consciousness of the futility of power marks even the poem 'Up to That Mound' where Alexander is present on his last conquest and where the poet, "taking an opposite route, makes a sudden appearance."

This man, helpless fighter that he is, isn't crazed by the prospect of a world-smashing 'tricolour'. Nor is he overwhelmed by the divine blessing 'Victory is Yours'. This is because he knows that there would be no difference between the victor and the vanquished: both would be equally callous. War implies a neat division of humanity into black and white, civilized and uncivilized. And, of course, killing and maiming people essentially like all others. This knowledge isn't much help though. For, war is a process which divests man of his humanity. To Kunwar Narain's way of thinking, this perhaps is the decisive factor in putting him off the very notion of victory:

> Once the gun was in hand
> It seemed to create
> Enemy heads all around.
> ('Military Preparation')

> Like always
> The route of glory and violence
> Abruptly loses itself
> In a dark shivering vale.
> ('On the Run')

This is the poet's mighty argument against ambition. He can visualize the desolate, friendless loneliness of the victor no less than the agony of the vanquished.

In war, then, one loses either way. Only inhumanity and dehumanization are the clear winners. The baffling part is that man is opposed to war and yet constantly engaged in it. The paradox has some other aspects too. At any rate it is a different kind of war; one might call it an ethical war.

The war, moreover, isn't merely external – it's internal too. This could have easily led to a cloistered approach and high-minded generalities. If Kunwar Narain escapes this, it's thanks to some of his basic premises one of which goes 'To Live'. The problem raised in 'Self-conqueror'

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is mainly a thinking man's problem. Mere happiness isn't enough. The real thing is to live 'meaningfully'.

Flying in the face of history the poet does war for "man's victory"; for "the man of invincible courage though vincible knees"; and for "the head held high." The poet wouldn't have this 'man' cooped up in "home" but is also keen on keeping his innate dignity, self-respect and selfhood from the queer routine in which preservation of integrity is nothing short of a miracle. "And the biggest miracle this/That coming home/I was the same old man."

"How to react to an impending crisis" appears to be the endless challenge because an open, easy relationship between 'Self' and 'Other' still eludes us. The chief symptom of our age is the ever-present imminence of danger: an atmosphere of doubt, distrust, violence and one-upmanship. It is not possible to dissolve Kunwar Narain's 'I' into 'We' because it is in fact a multiplicity of 'I's. The 'dissolution' is not right in that it negates reality and is therefore a form of escapism. It is not right also because the enlarged 'We' would also speak the language of the egoistic 'I', i.e., the language of power: "Even today/I'm afraid/Not of truth or falsehood/But of the crowd of blind believers." {'Even Today'}

However, the poet's war is not a 'supra-individual' affair: in the context it is "every individual's" war. As a weapon: "It seems necessary to keep alive - the moral solitude - which allows - prayer/or truth spoken to self - rather than flight from it." {'Instead of Myself'}

The shared space of these detached, yet inter-connected identities or 'individual beings' is at the centre of the poet's enquiry.

What then is the source of his meaning or significance? Determination to live is fine, but what is it to *live*? The poet believes that happiness is not enough: the real thing is to live for a 'meaning'. The 'meaning' is a creation of the 'Self'. Confrontation with death doesn't prompt the poet to see 'life' beyond life; nor does he tremble at the decisive end. For, he creates some meaning in this life and in this world before crossing the threshold of death. It is the crusade against the inhuman that gives him this 'meaning'. To preserve one's identity - and everyone else's - is to confirm to that 'meaning'.

Power psychology has impacted a number of Kunwar Narain's contemporaries. Shrikant Varma, Raghuvir Sahai and Vijaidev Narain Sahi, for example, use war metaphors. In Shrikant Varma's poems 'Self' is opposed to the 'Other'. His 'Self' is a warrior out to win; his sense of futility comes from his failure.

Kunwar Narain's 'Self' simply refuses to be aggressive or victorious. All he wants is to give a daring configuration to the stuff lying around

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to secure a 'meaning' for himself. But in this project, the 'Other' isn't barred out; everybody else is expected to find himself a 'meaning'. The poet believes that one's 'Self' achieves nothing by overcoming and dwarfing others. Kunwar Narain's 'Self' is not so self-centred, nor does he find endeavour futile.

Kunwar Narain doesn't yearn for the summit; he would much rather escape from this yearning: "Are we still/On the lows/Cowering under the heights." {'Qutub Minar'}

The worlds, nightmares and 'selves' of Shrikant Varma and Raghuvir Sahai might look somewhat more solid than those of Kunwar Narain. Through the notion of several pasts and several futures Kunwar Narain, identifying the 'selves' busy giving meaning to their 'individual' reality, appears to be saving the 'Self' from slipping into a 'type'. Unlike Raghuvir Sahai, Kunwar Narain has no proper nouns —a fact which gives him a somewhat abstract air. The names he does use come from history or mythology. This tends to create 'types'. But Narain succeeds in keeping a delicate balance between 'types' and 'individuals'.

In Vijaidev Narain Sahi, on the other hand, myths and war metaphors intermesh somewhat differently. Sahai's magic overwhelms the reader while Kunwar Narain's alertness, logicality, and analysis exact a slow, gingerly inspection of everything.

On his stories Kunwar Narain comments, "These stories are marked by an absence of the sensational dutifully present in the general run of stories. The style is conversational – cool-headed, unimpassioned, thoughtful. One might call it 'a romance with reality' ('romance' as used by Cervantes' Don *Quixote*). As if 'romance' were a special feature or an additional trait of reality rather than an escape from it.

Simultaneously, "deviating from the familiar style of story-telling I've demanded a new point of view from the reader. Rather than being entranced by the story, the 'new' reader is wide awake and participative. My stories have, in the process, sometimes come very close to the genres of poetry and the essay but not, I hope, at the cost of their basic identity.

The words and parts of sentences underlined in the above quotations from Kunwar Narain are a straightforward and fairly comprehensive presentation of his views on the creative process, art, and works of art. Exceptionally clear both in prose and in verse, Kunwar Narain is arguably the finest critic of his own creativity.

Translated from Hindi by Suresh Dwivedi

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Kunwar Narayan

Barbarians Arrive

It's no use worrying
They are already here. Once again
They have conquered us.

Their officers, ranks, commanders
Their henchmen, fools, buffoons
Their courtiers and loyalists
Their lackeys, lickspittles, touts...

They are all here. All.
They have taken over the city.
Its nooks and corners.
Hordes of them. Spoiling
For a free hand.

Translated from Hindi by Girdhar Rathi

A Homage to Cavafy

Mobilization
For thousands of years
The same man
Flogged.
The same old querry.
They ask:

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Who are you?
Where do you come from?
What is your name?

In a cell with eight still corners
The prisnor on guard
Keeping three warders in thrall.

Out there the forest
Dense with bars
Sprawling
Like the invisible magnetic lines.

They hand us the gun and
We begin to see
Enemy heads all around—Yet proving again
The mighty success
Of the call to arms...

Qutab Minar
Are we stuck in depths
So low
That the peaks still overwhelm us?

Can this ladder take us
To the summit
Where the minarets begin to taper off'
And the head can raise itself
To take the crown?

I have a telescope in my hands.
This side of the minaret
From where I watch
the ancient galaxies—
Their world all aglitter
In the fourth dimension.

I a witness to
A celestial feast
Honouring the birth of a new star

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Or
Just counting the starlets
In a night of gloom!

Even Today

As soon as he hazards a doubt
That, may be, after all
The earth does not revolve round the sun,
But the other way round...

They swoop on to him, they
The impatient ones. All of them
Out, once again
Smelling the blood of a Galileo.

I am scared, even today,
Not of the truth or untruth, but
Of those many, too many
Believers.

Translated from Hindi by Girdhar Rathi

On the run

A gloomy forest here
Invaded
Serially.
There is now a sense of drowning
An intense melancholy there
Instead of the bewildering dilemmas
Or the haunting memories of
Plunder and pillage.

The trail of glory and power—
After it has run its course
Down into the valley, dark and cold—
Where does it disappear
Without a trace!

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They arrive, time and again,
Not through the highways
Of the kings and robbers,
But through the lanes and bylanes –
tangled and crooked—looking for the hermitage
Of the arch-poet, Valmiki,
Far removed from the glittering maze...

They, who were besieged and burnt
Alive in their own homes,
In the jungles of dry grass,
They were paupers
With nothing but the ravaged corpses
As their own.

Their attempt , their miserable attempt
To run and save themselves
And their luggage
In the thick of the night!

They are still on the run
All over the empires
All over the wilderness

Translated from Hindi by Girdhar Rathi

The Present Times

It seems to have come back
And it knocks at my door—
The era of slaves and sultans!

There is a crowd gathering
At the Chandni Chowk.
And it is being ensured that
People queue up
Standing on but one leg!
That they be ready
To kowtow and to prostrate

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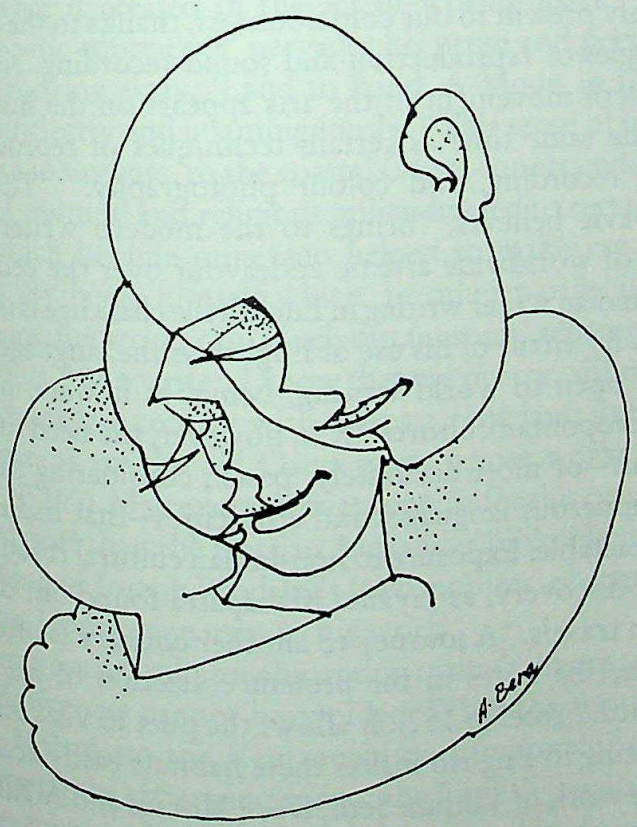
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Lined up from the Red Fort
Down to the Great Mosque!

A pair of antique eyes
Just excavated
Watches on—to see
Whose turn it is today
For the royal ride!

Translated from Hindi by Girdhar Rathi

❑



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Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs, by Jayanta Mahapatra, Authorspress, Delhi, 2007, Pp. x+224. Rs. 375

In an essay titled 'Poet in the Imaginary Museum', the British critic Donald Davie speaks of the challenges a poet faces in the present times. Echoing T.S.Eliot, Davie remarks that writers in the present age have to navigate a course between their own historically established past and the past of other world societies and cultures opened up for us by anthropologists and archaeologists. This move assumes a sense of different cultures being simultaneously present to our consciousness, thanks to the perfecting of the technologies of reproduction and sound recording. As Davie puts it, "The modern movement in the arts appears on the historical scene at roughly the same time as certain techniques of reproduction, like gramophone recording...and colour photography." "The imaginary museum", Davie believes, "brings to the modern writer 'the whole achievement of worldwide artistic endeavour over the centuries."

For an Indian writer writing in English the challenge is more insistent and complex. By virtue of his use of English as the language of creation, he is already open to world writing, being, as it were, placed at the centre of 'metropolitan cultures'. It is, however, the need for redeeming the Indian past—or more accurately 'pasts', considering that India is a country of numerous languages and ethnicities—that makes the poet's task quite intractable. Exposure to non-Indian cultural resources helps in a writer's self-discovery, as Jayanta Mahapatra found out on his Soviet and American travels. "A journey to another country is often a journey of exploration," he notes in the present collection of his critical and autobiographical prose. (p.152). It allows the poet to visit other 'writing habitats'. Writing in English makes these habitats easily accessible, as is revealed in the work of Vikram Seth, Dom Moraes and A.K.Ramanujan, to mention the more notable of Indian-English poets.

How one negotiates the diversity of India's mythic and historical past is where the poet's mettle is put to a severe test. Like Ramanujan, Mahapatra is acutely sensitive to this double bind. In essay after essay in what for me is a deeply personal book, there are references to many

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non-Indian writers, but it is the Indian earth, particularly the Oriya countryside, that offers him promises of an authentic self-expression as much as several hurdles in reaching out to a wider audience.

In one sense, then, this book is a record of Mahapatra's quarrel with himself that results in meditations, reflections and confessions rather than in manifestoes and sloganeering. Like Ayappa Paniker, about whom he writes with warm feeling (pp.133-137), Mahapatra believes that writing is a process of creating a self under constant revision, and that self-fashioning is a recurrent oscillation between one poetic inheritance and another. The finished poem embodies the integration of these inheritances. In the essay, 'Freedom as Poetry: The Door', he comments: "When I think of myself, I feel that much of the poetry I have written has been all the time asking questions of my life so that one comes up suddenly somewhere and encounters an image of oneself one had not seen before..." (p.3). In much of his prose these questions are related to the broader concerns of subjectivity and 'poetic conscience', of fidelity to what is and what is created in the act of writing itself.

Often 'poetic conscience' pervades his prose and poetry in equal measure. In a moving essay, 'Land to Land: A Moon in Our Eye' he makes his point clearly and unambiguously: "This sense of belonging to the Indian earth in my case, to the coastal Orissa countryside, to its very different social, cultural and religious milieu has led to certain ideas and convictions which became mine and helped to make my poems and stories" (p.53). By being himself which, in other words, is being true to his inheritance, the writer can 'touch distant souls' across geographical and other barriers. "As a writer, I know that my poetry, although written in English, has not lost contact with the past. The land itself is a living presence for me, as are the old Oriya poets whose works I have read and admired." (P.149). Mahapatra derives support for this confession from no less a world poet than the Russian Alexander Blok. He might as well have been talking of Joseph Brodsky's 'two empires' of inheritance and innovation that lends poignancy to his work.

Since being oneself calls for absorption in one's inheritance, a certain degree of exclusiveness cannot be avoided. What the writer can do to overcome it—Mahapatra and Ramanujan do it successfully—is to look at the past through the estranging eyes of the English language and bring forth what the commonplaces of cultural chauvnism hide from the reader's apprehension. In this way the stone temples of Orissa appear in a new light (see the essay 'Symphony in Stone,' pp, 107-110), as do Khandoba's temple stones in Kolatkar's 'JeJuri'.

An arduous task certainly, but Mahapatra, Kolatkar and Ramanujan

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undertake it without illusion or presumption. Obviously poetic statements in Mahapatra lack the air of finality; indeed the more tentative they are the better they can be explored by the poet as well as his readers. With disarming humility he sees himself as Santayana saw a philosopher, 'an ignorant man, almost a poet', conceding to poetry only 'a civilizing virtue which provides in the process a meaningful relationship between life and art' (p.67). Closer to Auden's low-key expectations than to the bardic pretensions of poetry such as Aurobindo's, Mahapatra tethers the poet to history's here and now, to 'the image of man that finds its way into the poem' (ibid). Neither decorously over-refined nor demonstratively didactic, such poetry demands a vocational allegiance of a high order—a trait happily present in Mahapatra's own work. (See the essay, 'Myth as Mantra,' pp.21-23).

As a poet whose own life-experiences inspire his work, Mahapatra finds contemporary Indian-English poetry deficient in many ways. What he regrets most is the failure of his fellow Indian-English poets to strike out from the native soil and only then seek accommodation with other modes and forms. In a statement that many of us would endorse he laments:

> It cannot be denied that nothing spectacular has emerged from years of our written poetry—nothing that in any manner resembles the nature of a classic. True, the voice is there, inside...but once it appears on the printed page it fails to establish a relationship with the readers. Perhaps the voice is a safe one, strongly bound to its ties and mannerisms, handed over to the Indians by the revered British poets. Neatly done, the poems lack the creative indirectness of approach that is the measure of true poetry... Where is that clairvoyance that works intensely, kaleidoscopically—to celebrate the awe and the mystery of the human condition (p. 47)?

I have quoted Mahapatra at some length in order to make the point that the integration of diverse poetic legacies is more a matter of 'clairvoyance' than a deliberate effort that often results in parody and pastiche. Compelled by temperament as well as history to school themselves in the ironic hesitancies of the post-Auden poetry, many of our new poets skirt round aspects of their socio-cultural position that are unamenable to the tongue-in-cheek irony of the kind one finds in the postmodernist Anglo-American verse. Hence the thinness, the absence of compositional pressures or of what Mahapatra calls 'a harmonious horizon of living and being' (p.48) in the outpourings of many younger aspirants.

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As a natural offshoot of his poetic practice, 'Door of Paper' constitutes Mahapatra's response to his invisible interlocutors and throws much light on his own poetry. But there is also the presence in the book of pure invocation that cannot be overlooked. Avoiding polemical posturing, he lets his hair down and contemplates his world in a spirit of unquestioning acceptance. Several essays vividly recreate the landscapes of Mahapatra's childhood and youth and invite the reader to participate unimpeded in 'some mythic journey of man' (p.71). To read these against the jargon-grinding of today's academic critique is, in a way, akin to deep-breathing in fresh alpine air.

M.L. Raina

Graffiti of My Soul, by Niven Govinden, Penguin, Pp. 216, Rs. 275

We shuffle in a world where everything gets analyzed through a prism of cynicism. Life is like a rerun of stale TV programs; ennui, it seems, is the leitmotif. Imagine being a teenager, yet your life cumbers down on you like a huge cliché. Much like the hackneyed graffiti they post on walls, there is graffiti on your soul too. It is easy to empathize with Veerepen, the 15-year-old half-Tamil, half-Jew schoolboy in Surrey, whose world is held together by a fragile thread of ennui. It is the sense of ennui that is helping him cope with life, because it prevents him from taking a hard look at anything. After all, coping with vagaries of life is easier, if you can avoid being obsessed with anything.

The book begins with a funeral. Veerepen has just buried Moon, who happened to be the love of his life. The pathos is there, but Veerepen is obviously wise beyond his years and he can avoid the rigmarole of being maudlin. The opening lines accurately picture his state of mind:

> My problem is that I can't see myself before the funeral. Really nothing. Moon's the one who's dead, and I can see her clearly. I thought it was supposed to be the other way round...Moon's got the sort of face that's hard to forget. She's not the one I'm worried about. It's my head that needs moulding.

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In any case Veerepen had lost Moon to a boy called Pearson much before she passed out of his life permanently. Moon may have preferred Pearson, but Veerepen knows the exact words to describe his rival:

> Pearson is a volleyball-playing shit-for-brains lump who thinks he's popular just for punching a stupid ball around an indoor court like a faggot.

But the narrative in the book is ultimately leading to the scenario where Moon dies. There is an element of mystery about how she dies. In a way the book is a tragedy, despite all her shenanigans, Veerepen is in love with Moon and she dies. You can feel the ache in his heart even when he is talking about something completely different. He is in love with her so he cannot afford to take a hard look at her death. Only thing he can do is to try to obscure his pain under a welter of ennui.

He moves from one incident to another, constantly making wry observations on everyone and everything that he encounters. He practices for race and track events with the disgraced trainer Casey, who is still living in hiding after being accused of child molestation last summer. There is Veerepen's best friend, Jason, who has never quite recovered from his sister's accidental death. Alongside his phony friends, Veerepen's world is made up of his family—a father who has eloped with an optician and his mother has started going off the rails. So much so that his mother won't even take care of his laundry. "I'm moving on. I can't be your maid forever. You're going to have to learn to take care of your own laundry."

But Veerepen knows how to deal with his mother, just as he knows how to deal with his phony friends. "Okey-doeky, lemon-cokey," that's all he needs to say to get her to leave him in peace. When there is a half Tamil and a half Jewish boy growing up in Surrey there's got to be a racial angle, howsoever mild and manageable it maybe. Veerepen is at his cynical best whenever he has to deal with race issues. His idea seems to be that they can't hurt me, as long as I refuse to feel hurt.

> I ain't dropping from any ledge yet. I like the attention too much. Agree or disagree at your leisure, but I find that anti-Semitism makes a pleasant change from Paki-bashing. I'm a strange boy, I admit it. At times, I'm fucking warped.

The teen life in the wired world has been pictured quite dramatically. Every child in the school has a cell phone, bar one, and she is making a statement through its absence. In fact, cell phones have a big role to

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play in *Graffiti of My Soul*. When a pedestrian is knocked down and cowed by disguised youths, the cool thing to do is to photograph the victim's fear before making an escape on the latest-brand bicycle. Another cool use of a cell phone is to use it for photographing another kid in compromising position at school. In a way, the cell phones have become the extension of every kid's personality, without it they would be nowhere. Their social networking depends on their ability to talk, and take photographs on their cell camera.

In *Graffiti of My Soul*, Niven Govinden seems to have made a genuine attempt to capture the essence of the eternal teenage experience of alienation. Today's wired world has led to kind of ephemeral society where everything is too wishy-washy to have any greater meaning. Technology has made life easier, but only at the cost of making old values and old social norms irrelevant. But where are the new values to supplant the ones that are gone. The heavy doses of cynicism and worldly-weariness that Veerepen exudes are symptomatic of this trend. He is only trying to eke out some friendship, romance, and love in a world full of squalor, betrayal and gossip. The breezy style in which the book is written, makes the *Graffiti of My Soul* a really good read.

Anoop Verma

Celebrating the Best of Urdu Poetry, Selected by Khushwant Singh and Kamna Prasad, Translated with an Introduction by Khushwant Singh, New Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2007, Pp. 191, Rs. 300

We have long known Khushwant Singh as a connoisseur of Urdu poetry. He has very ably translated Iqbal's *Shikwa* and *Jawab-e Shikwa*, and several other poets in bits and parts for his syndicated columns. He has thus been sharing his delight drawn from reading and translating Urdu poetry with his readers rather liberally. *Celebrating the Best of Urdu Poetry* is yet another effort that establishes his love for the Urdu language and its literature.

In his 'Introduction,' to the volume Khushwant Singh appreciates the great merit that Urdu poetry has but he also laments (and rightly so) the slow death of this language in the land of its birth. Making a mention of how this language came into being and how it developed ever since, he makes comments on the institutionalised concepts and images,

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as also personages and characters, that compose and constitute the larger capital of Urdu poetry. The resonance and musicality of Urdu words and the elements of wit, satire, and humour, he rightly believes, contribute in a major way towards making the ghazal an extremely popular form of poetry. That is how a remarkable part of this poetry, unlike any other poetry, has become a part of common memory and is frequently quoted to make a point in the plebeian and sublime conditions of life. And that is how it has also found a natural space in the domain of the popular with Hindi films, music composers, playback singers, and with common people who hum and hear couplets of lasting and not-so-lasting value with great relish.

Celebrating the Best of Urdu Poetry is, however, a typical anthology of Urdu verse—typical because it perpetuates many a myth about Urdu poetry. And not only does the book perpetuate the myths, it also (sadly enough) celebrates them. 'Almost all Urdu verse is overwhelmingly romantic,' he asserts in his 'Introduction' and that 'there is morbid obsession with the decline of youth into old age and, ultimately, death'. Finally, he declares that a 'mood of despair runs through much of Urdu poetry (xii).' This is not true, to say the least, for there is so much in Urdu poetry that is neither overwhelmingly romantic nor even remotely despairing. On the contrary, Urdu poetry has ever reflected the larger human condition in all its variety and its poetics has ever been marked by bold experimentations in form and technique.

Singh writes in his Introduction: "Although we have named this collection *Celebrating the Best of Urdu Poetry*, connoisseurs of the language may feel our selection doesn't deserve to be called the best (x)." Unfortunately, this is true. It is a collection of random couplets unevenly selected from twenty poets from Sauda to Zehra Nigah. While many canonical figures are missing (Khwaja Meer Dard, Siraj Aurangabadi, Hasrat Mohani, Fani Badayuni...), there are many who figure in this collection but are of no great consequence (Arsh Malsiyani, Abdul Hameed Adam, Ghulam Rabbani Taban...). Not many of the modernists, representing new poetics, find their place here. One naturally thinks of Nasir Kazmi, Ibn-e Insha, Muneer Niyazi, Zafar Iqbal, Kishwer Naheed, Saqi Farroqi *et. al.*, to name just a few of them. How can one celebrate the best of Urdu poetry without them being a part of that celebration?

Why did Singh make such a selection? Probably to represent a certain view of this literary tradition, one might say, and also to help the common reader enjoy this certain heritage. He says that he picked only his favourite couplets for the anthology which is a good enough reason to be guided by. In doing this, however, he has turned the anthology into a popular book by selecting individual/stray couplets in ones and twos (and sometimes

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more, but rarely in full, and by giving them titles that do not exist in the original texts, as he himself says that ghazals/couplets do not have titles. And in doing this, Singh has only confirmed what uninitiated readers of Urdu poetry often think about it. These readers generally perceive that Urdu poetry is all about love and longing, wine and tavern, sacred and profane, and such other ideas/notions that broadly fall under the category of the decadent. Instead of resisting these popular/wrong notions, Singh chooses to reiterate them. Several books like the one under review have contributed towards creating this squarely wrong impression about Urdu poetry. We surely did not need one more book to do the same. What would keep the common reader engaged with this book, however, are the notions that Singh perpetuates, and what would keep the informed reader from turning his back on the book is the quality of Singh's translations, and his brief notes on the poets that help one locate and read them in a tradition.

Anisur Rahman

The Scarlet Mission by Susanta Kumar Biswas, Kolkata, Indian Institute of Oriental Studies and Research, 2007, Rs. 275

Writing historical fiction in the postcolonial, postmodern world of narratives faces the challenges of the collection of a wide variety of archival material, field oriented research, memory related questions, serious organization and chronological break-ups and other things. In India, particularly, when one looks at the regional consciousness to be incorporated into the process of history writing, unlike the Western writing of history, we face the tremendous pressure of making history silent, rather than speak. This silencing of history is a deliberate shutting of a distant past. The inextricably interwoven threads of history and fiction as theorized by Paul Ricoeur and Hans Georg-Gadamer still have not appeared visibly in the regional conscious historical narratives in India... Susanta Kumar Biswas's *The Scarlet Mission* offers an insight into the 9th century A.D. Bengal history of Buddhism and the history of Gour, the then capital of the Pala empire.

Set against the backdrop of different empires that constantly incriminate against one another, *The Scarlet Mission* is an organization of the regional history of Bengal in all its historical differences. Underlying the conflict among the empires runs the schisms between *mahayanis* and

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vajrayanis—the two Buddhist sects whose differences had been quite intriguing from time immemorial. The official historical records are questioned by the author at the very outset of the text when we are let to know that between Shuropala and Devapala, the ruler Mahendrapala had a small entry. The suppressed historical narratives and the inscriptions are either untouched or neglected for a long time because the early Buddhist history of empires was seldom a topic for research among scholars and theoreticians. The most interesting aspect that arises here is the conflict within the regional history—a conflict that challenges the local inscriptions and beliefs. At the same time, this region oriented Buddhist empire and the struggles that it withstood perhaps never can rise up in the platform of national history. Historical fiction (not historiographic metafiction, in a postmodern sense) finds a space only to create but not to recover.

Outlined in the story of Samudrasena, the chief architect of the modern Buddhist warfare, a number of other characters are being presented such as Ambujakshya, Chitrapan—who are all set to save the future of Gour. Samudrasena looses all his accomplices one after another in his powerful ambition to protect Gour. Later only with Maharani Debishattva he could organize the plans to fight Shulopani and Bhattarak. In medieval India along with the capitals and associated kingdoms, the local empires and the dethroned classes of people played a very crucial rule. In the Buddhist and Jain empires, these classes had a lot to do to resurface the hidden and sunken ethos of all empires. The author very succinctly makes such classes speak here. The micro histories of Nalraj and other groups of people are woven into the major framework of the plot. The once renowned places like Prajyotishpur and Skandanagar and their associated histories of warfare are also brought out in the tale of Gour. Thus the citations of the regional history here is by and large an amalgamation of the histories of the locals. This is another mode of the new historic fiction writing.

Another prominent feature of this text is the distinction of the commercial class systems and the demarcations within the Buddhist empires. For instance, when Susanta Kumar Biswas writes about the *garva-griha* and *goshakats* prevalent in the 9th A.D., that makes an easy entry for any lover of history to penetrate into the medieval class structures in India. Perhaps for any Marxist historiographer, such descriptions may not be sufficient to examine the interstices of the past. But the mode of history changes constantly with time and therefore it resists all stringent outlayerings and recommendations.

The linear narrative of Susanta Kumar Biswas particularly would appeal to those who follow a normal story line. However, this method in the context of the story he outlines serves two entirely different purposes.

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The journey undertaken by Debishattva, the wife of the deposed king Mahindrapala and Samudrasena in fact gives us a geographic panorama of Bengal and Nepal. The mountains and rivers, particularly the Kalindi River becomes the chief notations of changes and transformations. This medieval topography can only be grasped by the imaginative platform of those times. Secondly, the warfare strategies and the flimsy military devices need to be presented in such a way to give life to those times. If the reader can attach one more central feature to this narrative strategy, it by all probability would be the suppressed sexual urge of Samudrasena toward Debishattva, about which the author gives hints but elides the matter several times. In the Epilogue to the text when the author makes Samudrasena, Debishattva and Rudrapala rest in the steep mountains of Paro Vihar, we only witness the quelled rebellion of their people against the mighty Gour. Would there have been another rebellion against the empire stirred up by the Koch tribesmen? The story wishes to continue from here.

The two Appendix that figure at the end of the novel are useful for the understanding of the times and customs. But this project suffers ultimately from bad proof-reading and stylistic errors. In some pages words are being repeated again and again and in another page an ungrammatical 'steep into' (where it should be 'steep in') is written by the author. A fiction can retain its quality only when commas and punctuations are appropriately put in place. *The Scarlet Mission* suffers from these drawbacks.

Krishnan Unni.P.

Words on Canvas: J.P. Das and His Work, Ed. by Ganeswar Mishra (General Editor Dinanath Pathy) Bhubaneswar, Lalit Kala Akademi, Orissa, Herman Publishing House, 2005, Pp. 263, Rs. 600

Words on Canvas is a tribute to J.P. Das, one of the most eminent writers of modern Orissa. His illustrious career spans over several decades and covers many disciplines: literature and the arts: drama, poetry, short story, painting, art history and cinema. He writes in Oriya and his works have been widely translated into English and major Indian languages, fetching him many coveted awards including one by the Sahitya Akademi. Most recently, he won the Saraswati Samman 2007.

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According to the editor of this volume, Ganeswar Mishra, *Words on Canvas* is the first comprehensive book on J.P. Das. It is a festschrift of a unique kind that brings together, before a discerning readership, a biographical introduction, excerpts from his writings such as poetry, fiction, plays and children's verse, as well as articles and reviews on his work. There are also reproductions of Das's paintings, a bibliography of his books translated or originally written in English, some letters addressed to him as well as sketches by him.

If one demurs about the decision of the Lalit Kala Akademi of Orissa to commission a work that goes beyond art or art history to include literature and culture in a broad sense, one will find sufficient justifications for this project. Versatility in artistic talents and excellence in many literary genres, a rare phenomenon in itself, does not function in distinct and isolated spheres of the mind of the creative individual. There is considerable merit therefore for undertaking a volume that through judicious selections, places the creative mind before an intelligent reader. Through the study of cross disciplinary perspectives and literary genres, one can appreciate the meaning of the artistic process.

The four opening chapters of the book place J.P. Das in the literary and artistic context.All four essays, each in a notable manner, assert this multifaceted personality. They comprise section one of the volume. Sumanyu Satpathy's well researched article entitled "The Artist as Polumetis: J.P. Das, His life and Works," is the first. This essay is is followed by Dinanath Pathy's "Alone and Together: J.P. the Art Historian," Inam Ansari comes next under a relatively short "Das Paintings." The section is rounded off by the well-known critic and Professor of English, G.K Das who traces the evolution in Das's writings in his essay "Romantic to Post-Modern."

Each of these essays contributes substantially to our understanding of Das's oeuvres. Sumanyu Satpathy's is the longest, and in its category, perhaps the best. Given the fact that Das himself is a reticent man and seldom speaks about himself or his background, readers are likely to find Satpathy's piece full of information and insight.

Beginning from J.P. Das's modest residence at Hauz Khas in South Delhi, Satpathy's account deftly moves to Das's circle of eminent friends and acquaintances, many alive and some dead, such as Satyajit Ray, Gulzar, Pupul Jayakar, Om Puri and Ravi Baswani. The biographer sees parallels between J.P's life and art. He says:

> Not given to verbosity in his creative life—witness his economical brush strokes on the canvas, his bare editions of poetry, and short story collections, with no foreword and afterward, the short, pithy titles of his stories,

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poems, his refusal to comment on his work and life, his avoidance of elaborate stage directions in his plays, reticence is the mark of the man.

Thus, by any reckoning, JP comes out as an unusual man and writer.

Satpathy divides JP's life into three phases: 1936-1957, 1958-1984, 1984 and after. In the first phase, we see, as Satpathy narrates, the birth of Jagannath Prasad as the third child of Sridhar Das and Indu Devi. JP matriculated with a first class from the Mission School of Cuttack and studied Economics at the Ravenshaw College. Later he pursued his M.A. in Political Science from Allahabad University, securing a first class.

Early in life, JP started writing poetry. Barely in his teens, as early as 1949, he published poems in the Oriya literary journal *Kum Kum* published from Bombay. In 1951 he brought out a poetry collection entitled *Stabak* (The Bud). Meanwhile, his work began to appear in such reputed Oriya journals as *Dagar* and *Jhankar* from Cuttack, *Asanta Kali* from Calcutta, *Prabhati* from Koraput as well as literary pages of widely circulated dailies like *Prajatantra* and *Asha*.

Joining the Students' Federation of India (SFI), JP along with another young talent, Manoj Das edited a magazine called *Agami* in 1954. In the first and second issue of the journal, it had among its contributors, celebrity writers such as Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Ananta Patnaik, Godavarish Mishra and Baikunthanath Patnaik.

At Allahabad, JP stopped writing poetry and concentrated on his studies as he prepared for the Civil Services. Poetry took a backseat. He also took up painting at this stage.

As an IAS Officer, J.P. Das was posted in Orissa. He got married in Cuttack in 1960 to Mitra, an acclaimed radio artist. They had a daughter Mona Lisa in 1962.

Posted at Kalahandi as an administrator JP came in close contact with hunger and suffering and wrote about this experience in prose and poetry. He continued his interest in drama, painting and cinema. He wrote two short plays in 1960. At Cuttack he became the President of the Cuttack Cultural Society and Kala Vikas Kendra. 1971 proved to be a watershed event in his artistic career. JP "used oil as his medium, experimenting with colours and concentrated on portraits rather than landscapes." His first exhibition of paintings took place in 1971. In 1973, JP along with Ananta Panda, Dinanath Pathy and D.C. Panda became the founder members of "Working Artists Association of Orissa." He realized that people knew more about Orissa's sculpture and dance rather than tradition of paintings. He wished to remove this imbalance. The opportunity came in 1979 when Joanna Williams of the Art History Department of the University of California at Berkeley visited Bombay

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on a lecture tour. Joanna's fascination for the palm-leaf art of Orissa brought her close to JP's research interests. Soon, JP won a Homi Bhabha Scholarship and undertook research on Pata paintings of Orissa. These came out under the title "Puri Paintings." Similarly, *Chitra Pothi : Illustrated Palm Leaf Manuscripts from Orissa* (1985) was another milestone, the first and the only comprehensive study of the unique and little known art form. However despite all this, poetry was not left behind.

Pratham Purush (First Person) came out in 1976 by Arnold Heineman. The same imprint published other collections in quick succession: *Love is a Season* (1978) and *Timescapes* (1980), a play *Before the Sunset* (1978).

In 1972, JP wrote his first full length play, *Suryastha Purbaru* (*Before the Sunset*). The play was staged by the Theatre Guild in Calcutta and was later produced by Ram Gopal Bajaj under the banner of *Dishantar* in Delhi in 1976 with Om Puri in the lead role. Ironically the original Oriya play was published and staged only in 1977. JP wrote many more plays, the last one being *Sundardas*. He is recognized as an exponent of the new theatre in Orissa and was a founder member of the Utkal Rangamanch Trust. Six of his plays are available in the translation form. He has received the Nandikar Theatre Award (Kolkata) and has been the Vice-Chairman of the National School of Drama.

Given JP's wide creative interests, administrative responsibilities clearly became a burden. Consequently he resigned from the IAS in 1983. Once at the "Meet the Author Program" of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, JP was asked by Keki N. Daruwala if he regretted his decision to resign from the I.A.S, JP's response was that he regretted that he resigned from the Service so late.

JP has been closely associated with *Manushi* as well as The Poetry Society of India, the Bharatiya Natya Sangh and Children's Film Society of India. He served on the jury of the International Children's Film Festival in 1985. He was a Chairperson in 1985 and a member of the festival in 1989. In 1990, his short story, "Interview" was made into a telefilm.

JP's sense of humor led him to experiment in the subgenre of "nonsense verse". He published two books of nonsense verse. Dinanath Pathy ably highlights JP the art historian. *Chitra Pothi* is singed out by him as a pivotal contribution to Orissan art history. According to Pathy, "JP as an art historian is much more important to Orissa than as a poet or writer." Similarly, Inam Ansari contends that JP

> wields both brush and knife with equal facility. His portraits and compositions are striking, but he has little to do with landscapes, mostly adhering to postures and expressions.

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On the other hand, G.K Das declares that a reader can read poems of JP and establish "intellectual connections between these originally constructed artifacts and those of her/his own literatures and culture."

The second part of the festschrift comprises reviews of JP's works that appeared in various journals and forums over the years. The third brings together extracts from his writings such as "Author speak," "Mask," "The Daffodil", "This Day", "Words" and "Before the Sunset" (Excerpt from the play). These as well as other exciting pieces such as *The Death of a Raja* and Nonsense Verses add to the strength of the volume. The book is complete with a bibliography, chronology of dates and events as well as rare photographs.

Words on Canvas is a very competently produced and timely volume. Well compiled and edited, the festschrift is a fine tribute to a multifaceted talent from Orissa. It is a collector's item that speaks as much about the writer and the artist as the land and culture he represents.

Sachidananda Mohanty

When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerades in Indo-Muslim Poetry by Carla Petievich, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp.365. Rs.695.00

This is a fascinating book for any lover of poetry. Carla Petievich has been researching and writing on the feminine/female voice in Indo-Muslim poetry for quite sometime and this book may be seen as the fine fruit of her research over several years. Here she explores one of the most interesting conventions in the poetry of the subcontinent, i.e. when the male poets take on the persona of the female and express the deepest longings, urges, feelings and sentiments of women, in an idiom that is both secular and devotional. She chooses the genre of *kafi* from early Punjabi, early Urdu *ghazals* from the Deccan and *rekhti ghazals* from the nineteenth century Lucknow as illustrations of her project. In the general introduction to the volume she explains the concept of "Indo-Muslim" and laments the fact that purists in Urdu literature dismissed certain kind of poetry for lacking the Muslim elements. Petievich then explores questions of canonicity, literary conventions, gender and so on to provide a useful context in which the samples of poetry she showcases can be studied. Such unconventional literary genres have always been either erased from or pushed to the margins of canonised literature and it is in the fitness

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of things that they should be recovered in the postcolonial times. In fact, the three bodies of poetry featured in the volume are, according to Petievich, represent 'casualties of cultural history' and her project is, 'partially and unabashedly one of recuperation.' That is certainly a laudable aim and the volume demonstrates her painstaking efforts at recovering and reclaiming a segment of our literary and cultural life that was all but lost to many.

The image of a woman separated from her lover is a perennial theme in literature and it is part of the literary conventions found in almost all the language-literatures of India. Carla Petiviech traces it back to Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* (12th century AD) and then links it up with the Bhakti conventions of love, particularly, the *nirgun* poetry of Kabir and Nanak. She also explores lineages of the Indo-Persian conventions sedimenting the concepts of *virahini, jogi* etc.

The first section of the collection showcases Punjabi *kafis. Kafis* cover a wide variety of themes though most of the poems featured here, 12 by Bulleh Shah and 13 by Shah Madho Lal Hussain, are expressions of love in separation, and modelled on the story of the legendary heroine, Hir, who loved her father's cowherd, Ranjha. The speaking voice is always Hir, the woman, as in the following *kafi* by Shah Husain:

> Without my Beloved the nights have lengthened.
> Ranjha a *jogi*, I a *jogini*, they always call me mad,
> with shrivelled flesh, chest just a ribcage, no more than
> skin and bones–
> Without my love the long nights waste me.
>
> Ignorant, what do I know of love? I'm
> tugged and pulled by
> Separation's tent ropes.
>
> Without my love the nights stretch longer.
>
> Says Husain, the Lord's *faqir:*
> 'I'm tied to your apron strings.'

One striking quality of this poetry is that it is couched in a secular idiom and is against all kinds of sectarian distinctions. In this sense it is truly representative of the Indo-Muslim culture. One of the most popular *kafis* of Bulleh Shah, the foremost practitioner of the genre, is—*Hindu nahin na Mussalman* which runs as follows:

> I'm neither Hindu nor Mussalman
> no such pride here in love's spinning circle!

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Neither Sunni am I, nor yet Shi'a
I have taken the path of perfect *entente*...
I'm neither a sinner nor very holy
and couldn't care less about taking sides.
Bulleh Shah, the ones who are thinking
have let go of names like Hindu and Turk!

Dakani Ghazal is represented in the second section by most of the known names from the Deccan like Muhammad Quli Qutub Shah, Abdullah Qutub Shah, Mulla Vajhi, Mulla Ghavasi, Nusrati, Hasan Shauqi, Ali Adil Shah and Hashmi Bijapuri. Dakani ghazal is different from both Punjabi *kafi* and *rekhti* insofar as it developed in or around the court, and is highly self-conscious as ghazal as a genre is. However, unlike ghazal, it is not solemn or sad or obsessed with the beloved's indifference and heartlessness. On the contrary, it celebrates love's joys and is filled with a kind of exuberance and light heartedness which made it open to charges of levity and lack of seriousness by mainstream Urdu critics, and so consigned to the margins in Urdu literary historiography. Of the eight poets featured in this section three were kings, and kingship has a pivotal place even in the poetry of others. Among the kings, Quli Qutub Shah certainly occupies the pride of place as the progenitor and the first sahib-i-diwan of Urdu poetry. The following extract from one of his ghazals demonstrate Dakani Ghazal's predilection for the use of Indic vocabulary and its liberal ethos:

Téré darsan ki hoon main sain mati
mujhe la do piya chhati sun chhati
Pyare hath dhar sanbhalo munj kun
Kih til til duti tuj mati darati

Beloved, I'm mad for the sight of you!
Sweetheart, come lay your breast
on mine
Sweetheart, take my hand [and me]
under your protection
and may it, at every moment
strike fear in those others mad for you

The third section of the book presents *rekhti*, the prime genre that unabashedly flaunts male perception of female desires and longings. *Rekhti* is conventionally associated with effeminacy and the phase of decadence of Muslim power in India, a view that needs to be examined closely. Rangin, the inventor of the genre, asserted that he wrote *rekhti* to honour the women of ill-repute with whom he spent a considerable part of his life. The mannerism, diction and turns of phrases used by courtesans

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left such an indelible impression on him that he felt impelled to immortalise them in his poetry. Levity and irreverence characterise *rekhti* verses, usually dealing with women's gossips, the tense relationship between housewives and their in-laws, "the perils of coping with drunkard husbands, catty allusions to hen-pecked husbands and domineering wives; salacious references to wantonness; innuendo in the guise of comments on cooking vegetables; and in-house winking at entertaining men who should not have access to the *zenana*." As an illustration one can look at the following verses:

> When that home wrecker comes to stay
> I can't tell you what trouble I have holding my tongue!
>
> *How my heart turns to a burnt* kabob
> at the things I endure
> When he comes home drunk.
>
> *Ma'am, what should I do?*
> That matter never transpired yet –
> The bridegroom maintains *purdah* from his bride!
> ...
> These damned ladyfingers are so awful!
> no matter how you cook them
> they stay slimy....

The introductions to the individual sections provide helpful contexts for reading verses in that particular tradition with a certain amount of insight and understanding. The selection of verses is both judicious and representative of the individual traditions. The design of the volume – with the original on the facing page, and the roman transliteration following the translation – make it extremely reader-friendly. The poetry of humour, banter and wordplay does not lend itself easily to translation. Petievich refers to the challenges of translation in the section on *rekhti*. It goes to her credit that she has met the challenges valiantly and produced a version, fairly readable and fluent in English, even though alternative versions are possible. The annotations are well-researched and will whet the appetite of those interested in the field. All in all, the volume is a welcome addition to the corpus of Indo-Muslim poetry in English and will find its niche in departments of literatures, culture studies, and women's studies.

M. Asaduddin

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Suckling Eve by V G Thampy, translated by Bindu Krishnan, 2007, Calicut, Mansoon Editions, Pp. 104, Rs. 125

Three somewhat introspective pieces of prose, a foreword by the poet, a note by the translator, and an introduction 'Speaking the unspeakable' by the publisher precede this collection of somewhat dark and melancholy verse. And in a way it would have been appropriate to reproduce the poet's own subjective interpretation of his own thought and expression, rather than getting into a value judgment which again, at best, can only be subjective. Because a question does arise in the reader's mind, as it does not seem to have arisen in the mind of the trinity (though Christianity does not believe in this Hindu belief): the creator (the poet), the translator (the preserver), and the destroyer or the re-creator (the publisher), why bring into open an individual's personal angst?

"There is a time burning, in every poem," confesses the poet. "Most of these poems are experiences that tend to weep intensely inwards," the muses. "I leave behind in these poems, a soul, burnt and scorched at the edges," he adds further. All that is understandable, though one can enter into a 'quarrel' with the poet on the need to inflict his personal angst on others because there seems nowhere an attempt, in prose or verse, to share it with them. The 'quarrel' with the translator is more about the invisible "portrayal of Woman—its lingering impact" that captured her imagination and prompted to seek to transport them "between two languages." And this she does by being faithful, literal to the original text which at least at times seems to limit both the lyrical and the dramatic impact of the original metaphor. One must, however, give her the credit for making a valiant attempt to 'ferry' the agony of a troubled psyche 'across the river – the river between two languages, two cultures."

One read and re-read the poems several times to look for substance that the translator in general and the publisher in particular found inherent in these verses. While one felt, sensed and experienced many other things, one certainly did not seem convinced that "for Thampy, poetry has always been a meticulous way of using language to explore the darkened and the unfathomed areas of human mind where a sense of obsessive guilt and an equally intense longing for redemption lie buried. Hence, each poem becomes a quick and unique utterance in which 'Graveyard is granary/ A blood field/Where those who sowed get reaped./A green tiara of dawn and dusk/A bowl of infinite hope'."

There is no denying the obvious melancholy refrain (there isn't much

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beside). But most of these verses are abstract—at least in the language of transportation. Not many, therefore, seem to work on the whole to the intended effect. But one of those that seem to work is 'Arboreal Altar', though the concrete, direct imagery does dilute the overall impact. It opens on an intense note:

Today
All consuming blind lust
Gallops within us
Desires sans
Leaves and fruits
Words and seeds.

And then losing the seeming connection between words, images, thoughts, feelings, emotions and continuity ends up equally profoundly:

A crown of thorns
Weaving the foliage of earth
A spectral crematory
feathers and wings
Of dead birds.
Within these crumbling walls of ashes
Undesired motherhood of angels
Rejected fatherhood.
The crowing eyes of leaves
The scorched leaves
Fall/
Littering the earth.

The opening title poem 'Suckling Eve' itself jolts one with a series of contradictory images. It heralds a dawn, and then a dusk, and then unfolds:

No, there is nothing to forget
Nothing to remember too.
No you never had
A childhood to toddle.
No, you never heard
A lullaby to sleep.
you never knew
The sweetness of breast milk.
Eve, you were born
A rainbow-radiant maiden.
You've never known
The viscous ripples of a womb.

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'Breast milk', incidentally, seems to be a lingering, obsessive image with the poet. The lines are self-explanatory to demand a further comment. But then this seems one of the partly bright or radiant spot in the otherwise dark, gloomy world of the poet who is perpetually eulogizing the sulking rather than the suckling. There are also metaphors and expressions that are either morbid, or weird or even beyond the realm of the imagined. Many poems seem to convey thoughts, feelings, and emotions through individual lines or images but fail to translate into a wholesome experience.

There is obviously more to the poet than what gets ferried across, though one can hardly blame the transporter who seems to have, despite not being a "translator by profession" made a sincere attempt. For a fair assessment one must revert to the publisher who has sought to put the work and world of the poet in a perspective. According to him: "V G Thumpy does not belong to any school of poetry in Malayalam. At same time, in him, one can find a mélange of various traditions from romanticism to realism, from surrealism to naturalism, from imagism to flat statements, and from lyricism to complex narration."

Suresh Kohli

Mosquito, a novel by Roma Tearne, Harper Perennial, London and New York, Pp. 298; Rs295/-

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This is a beautiful and powerful story of love between a writer and his very young painter girl friend set in the tropical jungles and snow white sandy beaches of Sri Lanka, where the Tamil Tigers are slugging it out with the government security forces for power and a vision of their own concerning self-rule and territory. Written in lucid golden prose which often feels like good poetry written in a lyrical whisper, the haunting images of undying love and hope that eventually overcome the vagaries of war and strife, will no doubt touch any reader's heart who is sensitive of mind and possesses the humanitarian touch.

Theo Samarajeeva, the elderly fiction writer who has already made a name for himself in England, now travels back to his house and homeland on the beach to write his next book. But the resistance wishes to press gang him for their own purpose. "He writes eloquently. Foreigners respect him. We need him to speak out against the government," opine the freedom fighters who wish him to subtly launch a broadside against the state through

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his writings. Nulani Mendis, the dark beauty and artist who comes to the writer's cottage to do portraits, often stays on for a meal, a chat and a walk on the deserted beach. Sugi the manservant looks after both master and friend and only exits the book when in an act of self-sacrifice he dies saving the girl from the security forces—who are up to no good—and can be aptly called the local Jeeves who will render a sagacious suggestion to the master and then quietly withdraw behind the curtain. As more violence erupts on the island and it becomes a free for all between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, Theo returns only to be kidnapped and tortured, and Nulani has to flee to London where she gets to begin to be noticed as a serious painter from the sub-continent. All this while Nulani thinks that her lover is dead, and it is through the efforts of a couple friendly to Theo that he is reunited with his long lost love in a tender moment, which Tearne describes thus:

> And as he held her sleep-warmed body against his, letting her cry, knowing what she was thinking, thinking it too, he breathed again the faint fragrance of her hair from some other time and some other place of long ago.

The love-making is sensuous yet not vulgar as many authors today are drawn to write about, and the selfishness and opportunism that often sprouts between communities when the very survival is at stake, are etched vividly by an author who seems to know her land and its people well.

Tearne's writing is for real, each line, and that is for sure. Whether it is the bloodshed in the civil war that rages on, or the descriptions of the coastline and the countryside. She writes, "Rubber tyres hung like nooses on trees waiting for men to swing for unknown crimes. There were bullet holes everywhere". This certainly is a very real description of a wasted and war-ravaged land, the likes of which this reviewer had often witnessed first hand in Vietnam and then later on in Afghanistan. Like the artist that she actually is, she paints the coast vividly,

> Often, before the monsoon broke, the sea was like a mirror. The sky appeared joined to it with barely a seam, there was a faint vibration of thunder and along the shoreline the air hung in hazy folds, suspended between land, and sea, and sky.

There is suspense and there is emotion in these pages, and like a scourge the mosquito settles in like a dark cloud over this disturbed land. Members of families rise against each other reporting to the authorities communist commune living-style, one community is out killing the other, and religious hatred defiles the landscape. In all this, Nulani and Theo survive to tell their bewitching tale. A powerful message for all of us in the subcontinent

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lies within these pages, and that is that insurrections and bloodshed never solved anything, and that it is the inner conscience of every human being that eventually points to an answer and solution. Not only organizations like the 'Care of Victims of Torture' should take note of genocide and state killings that are depicted in the book, but also every individual, no matter wherever he or she may be, needs to raise a stern voice against such mindless violence.

Roma Tearn's next book will be worth waiting for.

Himmat Singh Gill

The Man from Chinnamasta, Indira Goswami, Translated by Prashant Goswami New Delhi: Katha, 2006, Pp.188, Rs.250/-

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The Man from Chinnamasta, Indira Goswami's novel based on the *tantric* tradition of Kamakhya, is now available for English-speaking audiences in a translation. The text is followed by an "Afterword" by Amritjyoti Mahanta, which provides a succinct and interesting overview of the context in which the novel is placed. Indira Goswami's fiction has moved through different trajectories and cultural spaces over the years and questions of identity and social paradigm have been consistently highlighted in her oeuvre. *The Man from Chinnamasta*, as the title indicates, addresses conditions of local knowledge in the context of contemporary realities. The representation of conflicting cultural identities provides an interesting setting to the narrative; the narrative also encompasses important events like the *Ambubachi* and which helps Goswami in organizing the story within the chosen cultural matrix. The difference in perceptions, attitudes and perspectives appear to determine the relationships of the characters as well as the difficulties of understanding one another. This condition sometimes moves beyond the personal plane to reflect the preoccupations that situate people in society. Take for instance, the following passage, which exemplifies differences of perception and suggest a lack of understanding between the two social groups in question:

> The *Ambubachi* was over. Devotees were streaming back to their homes. Those who stayed on in the deserted buildings and the caves around Bhuvaneshwari noticed two *tantriks* meditating in the Brahmaputra waters. They were there all night, snakes entwined in their hair.

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> A couple of British officers who had turned up for shooting practice happened to see the *tantriks*' bobbing heads. They thought they would have some fun. They fired into the air to scare them out of their trance. But the *tantriks* didn't budge. So deeply were they meditating that it seemed as though even a bullet through the heart could not disturb them. (116)

In highlighting this perceptive difference, Goswami arranges two separate paradigms as processes of apprehending reality. But such a distinction is not maintained throughout the narrative. Dorothy Brown, an apparent outsider, is presented as an example of movement across distinctive cultures and the reader is informed that she could write "flawless Asomiya." In a way, the novel's characters represent a variety of cultural spaces—Jatadhari with his mystique, a traumatized Dorothy Brown and an indifferent society.

The narrative fluctuates to wonderfully accommodate the machinations of a social order that relies on the idea of tradition to perpetuate values and structures that are open to challenge. In a way, *The Man from Chinnamasta* recapitulates the old/new paradigm in a specific context, which is that of the *tantric* way of life prevalent in Kamakhya, but at the same time it also suggests that such a dual opposition may not always be the proper mode of apprehending the immediate realities of that society. The two most important figures in the novel, Jatadhari and Dorothy, serve as interesting sites for the re-reading of stereotypes. The mystery and mystique of Jatadhari is simultaneously enhanced and problematised in the narrative. And the murder of Dorothy, on the other hand, offers another dimension to the old/new paradigm. Goswami's focus on the need to re-evaluate existing parameters of social organization, however, is presented in terms of a didactic strategy. If Goswami interrogates the logic of ritualized spirituality in the novel it is evidently a critical exercise rather than a call for complete replacement. The search for balance provides the key to the narrative fluctuations as the form and content coalesce to articulate the possibility of a different order.

The Man from Chinnamasta also gives an account of the different practices that distinguish Kamakhya from other similar sites. In some cases, Goswami is considerably detailed in her description of the nuances of these practices. What is of interest however is the way in which superstition, faith and social necessity are interfused to reflect a cultural matrix that cannot easily be described. The sense of mystery and fascination for the divine may serve for some as the mode of hierarchical enhancement, but it also indicates the difficulties of unsettling existing structures. The plot of the novel is further complicated by the presence of the British

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as the *other*. The use of such a pre-colonial context is however, not overdone, and apart from Dorothy, most of the non-Indians remain on the periphery. This presence of the 'western' perspective, as it were, invites us to think about possible modernities that may contest and challenge traditions. Dorothy's shock at witnessing a sacrifice stands at one extreme of such a possible perception of 'traditional' practice, while the satire about outmoded rituals offers another possibility. Consider this passage which narrates Dorothy's reception of a ritual sanctioned by 'tradition' as necessary for divine appeasement:

> What will he do? Firmly holding onto the student's hand, Dorothy watched, appalled. A devotee pushed through the crowd and offered a dove to the deodha. He tore off its neck with his teeth and drank the blood, then threw the carcass into the crowd.
>
> Oh no. No! Such things must not happen! The jatadhari had said that a devotee who kills animals and birds with his bare hands commits a cardinal sin, equal to killing a Brahmin.
>
> "Ma ... Ma ... Ma!"
>
> It was the jatadhari's voice. A cry of distress ...
>
> (173)

There are thus layers of perception that situate the personalities of the different characters. Dorothy represents a kind of coming together of openness and accommodative tendencies, but in the context of the rigidities of the cultural world she comes to inhabit, such an attitude only serves to hasten her end. The final image of Jatadhari and his disciples wounding their bodies culminates the frenzy that found manifestation in various previous episodes of the novel. *The Man from Chinnamasta* is more than a novel of spiritual enquiry; it extends to incorporate issues of individual choice and social strategy, it questions values viewed as traditional and views critically the advent of the new. It documents with remarkable vigour tendencies of social and political arrangements and offers a perspective on the possibilities of cultural transformation. The translation by Prashant Goswami reads well, but in some passages culturally loaded terms could have been more judiciously used. The absence of references indicating the significant terms relating to local contexts is one of the drawbacks of this edition. The "Afterword" sheds light on the context and deserves to be commended for providing a critical perspective on the novel.

Bibhash Choudhuri

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Our Contributors

Ahtesham, Manzoor (b.1948) Hindi fiction-writer and playwright; has ten novels, four short-story collections and two plays to his credit; recipient of Shikhar Samman from M.P. Government, Padmashree and Pahal Award. Add: Shilpkar House, Opp. Grand Hotel, Bharat Talkies Crossing, Bhopal 460 001

Ajir Kutty, K.M. Translates from Malayalam to English; presently working in the office of Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. Add: Mankoottam Thodi, Edava 695 311, Kerala

Asaduddin, M. (b.1959) Writes in Bangla, Urdu and English and translates from and into these languages; also knows Assamese, Hindi and French; Professor of English Literature at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Add: 90-S, Sector 8, Jasola Vihar, D.D.A. Flats, New Delhi 110 025.

Adiga, Gopalakrishna (1918-1992) The most influential poet and critic who pioneered New Poetry in Kannada; *Nabedu Banda Dari, Bhumigita, Vardhamaana* etc. are his major collections that contain his trademark poetry—full of unparallelled passion and complexity, irony and an unflinching attention to contemporary reality through a sinewy language; edited the literary review *Sakshi* which is important in Kannada literary history; winner of awards and honours like Sahitya Akademi Award (1974), Kabir Samman (1992) etc.

Amur, G.S. (b.1925) Well-known Kannada writer and critic who also writes in and translates into English; has several published works to his credit; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award for his literary crticism, *Bhuvanada Bhagya*, Pampa Prashasti etc. Add: "Janaki", Navodayanagar, 14/A Cross, Dharwad 580 003.

Anantha Murthy, U.R. (b.1932) Kannada writer with more than twenty books including pathbreaking novels like *Samskara, Bharatipura* and *Avaste*, several short-story collections, poetry-collections and critical works to his credit; prominent educationist and cultural figure of the country; former President of Sahitya Akademi; winner of several

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awards including Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award, Masti Literary Award and Jnanpith Award; honoured with Padma Sri, Padma Bhushan, D.Litt from Rabindra Bharati Universiety, Kolkata and Ucha Tibati Sisksha Sansthan, Sarnath, Varanasi; elected Fellow of Sahitya Akademi. Add: 498, 6th Main, RMV 2nd Stage, Bangalore 560 094. Email: urananthamurthy@gmail.com

Anju Narzari (Anjali Basmatary) Bodo poet ; has four collections of poems and short stories; recipient of Rangsar Award by Bodo Sahitya Sabha. Add: Kokrajar Govt. College, Kokrajar-783 370, Assam.

Bera, Amit (b.1978) Young artist. Add: WZ-187, M-28, Hari Nagar Clock Tower, New Delhi 110 064.

Baligar, Manu: Kannada short-story writer and poet; has four collections of poems, three collections of short stories, one biography and one literary criticism besides five edited works to his credit; has won awards of Gorur Foundation, Attimabbe Pratishtana and Lingaraj Desai Literary Foundation. Add: Pvt. Secretary to Minister for Food & Civil Supplies, R. No. 262, Vidhana Soudha, Bangalore 560 001.

Chakma, Jogamaya (b.1960) Writes poetry in Chakma and Bengali; has two collections of poems to her credit; working as Deputy Director (School/Mid Day Meal), Directorate of School Education, Govt. of Tripura ; she is also Secretary of the North-East India Poetry Council. Add: Govt. Quarter No.111/15 (Old Rabindrapalli), Agartala 799 001.

Choudhury, Bibhash: Critic; also translates from Assamese into English; has one book, *English Social and Cultural History: An Introcution Guide and Glossary* and several edited works besides numerous articles in English as well as in Assamese; presently associated with Guwahati University, as Senior Lecturer in English. Add: Ananda Path, House No. 17, Behind M.L.A. Hostel, Dispur, Guwahati 781 006.

Choudhury, Saroj Kumar: Critic; writes in English and Bengali. Add: C/o P.K. Nandi Majumdar (Near Bank of Baroda), Mathchowmohani, Agartala 799 001.

Darga, Ramzan: Kannada poet; one of the pioneers of the Bandaya literary movement; also involved in several humanist movements; he successfully combines Marxian humanism with universal spirituality; has three collections of poems, of which *Hokkalalli Hoovidhe* is important. His book of critical essays, *Sahitya Samaja* is well-known. A journalist by profession, he works in the editorial department of *Prajavani*. Add: No. M.F. 4/7, D

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Block, Nandini Layout, Bangalore 560 096 or Reporter, Prajavani, 75, M.G. Road, Bangalore 560 001.

Daruwalla, Keki N (b.1937) Eminent poet, fiction writer and critic in English, with six volumes of poetry, one volume of short stories and a travelogue; won Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of poems, *The Keeper of the Dead* (1984) and Commonwealth Poetry Award. Add: 79, Mount Kailash, SFS Flats, Pocket A, New Delhi 110 065.

Deb, Mihir (b.1941) Writes poetry in Bengali; has one book of poems to his credit; also writes articles on scientific and other topics. Add: North T.R.T.C. (In front of LIC Office), Thakhurpally Road, Krishnagar, Agartala 799 001.

Dwivedi, Suresh: Critic in Hindi; translates from Hindi to English and vice-versa; retired from teaching English in Dayal Singh College, Delhi University, Delhi. Add: No. 115, Sahyog Apts., Mayur Vihar Phase – I, Delhi 110 091

Gill, Himmat Singh (b.1938) English writer, reviewer and columnist; some of his important published works are *Ashes and Petals* and *The Commitment* etc.; retired as Major General from the Indian Army. Add: H.N. 229, Sector 35-A, Chandigarh 160 022.

Gupta, Ashes (b.1969) Teaches English at Tripura University, Tripura. Add: 'Ashirbaad', Ramnagar Road No. – 6, PO: Ramnagar , Agartala 799 002, West Tripura.

Hyder, Qurratulain (1927-2007) One of the most prominent modern Urdu fiction writers; has to her credit four collections of stories, eight novels, four novelettes and several volumes of miscellaneous writings; among the best known of her novels are *Ag Ka Darya* (novel), *Patjhar Ki Awaz* (short stories); her works have been translated into several Indian and foreign languages; recipient of Soviet Land Nehru Award, the Iqbal Samman, Sahitya Akademi Award and Jnanpith Award; she was a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi. Add of her legal heir: Flat No. E-55, Sector 21, Jalvayu Vihar, Noida-201301, (U.P.)

Kohli, Suresh (b.1947) Poet, literary critic, literary editor and documentary film-maker. Has published four collections of poetry, one novel and edited several volumes of essays and short stories. Has translated extensively from Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi. Edited and published *The Indian Literary Review* from 1979 to 1990. Add: E-180, Greater Kailash Part II, New Delhi 110 048.

Kolar, Laxmipati: Kannada poet with two collections—*Maya Kinnari* and *Neeli Tatti.* He has done extensive research in folk and tribal

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lore, and has an important book on Mashtikas, a Scheduled community; has a collection of critical essays, *Kaaludhari*; he also writes film scripts. His latest work is a play on Allamaprabhu. Editor of several literary magazines like *Aniketana*. Add: No. 14, 3rd Main, (Near 8th Main), Ist Stage, Basaveshwara Nagar, Bangalore 560 079.

Krishnanunni P. Poet and critic both in English and Malayalam; teaches English in a college under Delhi University. Add: 71-D, Pocket-A, Sukhdev Vihar, New Delhi 110 025.

Kulkarni, Satish: Kannada poet who is another pioneer of the Bandaya movement; has three books of poems, *Vishada Yoga*, *Odalala Kichhu* and *Company Sawal* and a collection of short stories, *Theera*. He is active in theatre and has three collections of plays. He writes poems which are at once political and profusely lyrical. His famous poem, or rather an invocation, which begins "Kattutheva, naavu Kattutheva," is sung in all gatherings and meetings of peoples' movements. He works in the Karnataka Electricity Board. Add: 242, Basaveshwara Nagara, Haveri 581 110

Kunwar Narain (b.1927) Well-known Hindi poet; some of his important works include, *Chakravyooh*, *Apne Samne* (poetry), *Atmajayee* (epic), *Akaron Ke As-Pas* (stories) etc.; recipient of Prem Chand Award, Kumaran Asan Award, Tulsi Award, Vyas Samman, Sahitya Akademi Award etc. for his poetry collection, *Koi Doosra Nahin*, 1995 Add: S-371, Greater Kailash – I, New Delhi 110 048.

Lalnunpuia Hrahsel: Mizo poet; teaches in a Govt. Mizo Higher Secondary School, Aizawl; has eight published works, both in English and Mizo, to his credit. Add: Luangmual Vengthlang, Aizawl, Mizoram 796 001.

Mohanty, Sachidananda: Critic and translator; has two books on D.H.Lawrence and has edited three others; his essays and articles have appeared in several leading journals; has been honoured by Katha Award for outstanding translation, Katha British Council Translation Prize and University Grants Commission's "Career Award". Add: Professor, Dept. of English, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad 500 046.

Mushtaq, Banu (b.1948) Kannada fiction writer and poet; is a lawyer by profession; her important works include, *Kabbu* and *Badavara Magalu Hennalla* (novels), *Hejje Moodida Hadi*, *Benki-Male* (short stories). Her stories have been translated into Hindi and Malayalam; recipient of Savitramma Datti Nidhi Bahumana and Karnataka Raja Prashasti. Add: Advocate, 4348, Vallabhai Road, BARP Quarters' road, Hassan 573 201, Karnataka

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Nagabhushana, Savitha: She is an important woman poet in Kannada who came to the fore in the 1980s. Has four collections of poems, *Naa Baruthenu Kelu, Chandranannu Kareyiri Bhoomige, Hole Magalu, Jathrayalli Shiva*, and now, a volume of colleted poems. Her novel *Streeloka* is an experimental one. Her poetry has been noted for its pristine simplicity and feminine tenderness. The first Kannada woman poet to get Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award, she is Editor of the women's literary magazine *Mudi Mallige*, and another literary journal, *Sahitya Samvaad*. Add: H.I.G.-5, K.H.B. Colony, Kallahalli Extension, Vinobhanagara, Shimoga 4

Naikar, Basavaraj (b.1949) Kannada fiction-writer, critic and translator; has several published works both in Kannada and English; his collection of short stories *The Thief of Nagarahalli and Other Stories* was short-listed for the Commonwealth Fiction Prize from Eurasia in the year 2000. *The Sun Behind the Cloud* (novel) and *The Rebellious Rani of Belavadi and Other Stories* were well-received by the critics. Add: Professor and Chairman, Department of English, Karnataka University, Dharwad 580 003, Karnataka.

Naoroibam, Sudhir (b.1969) Manipuri short-story writer and playwright; has brought out three collections of short-stories and one play, *Shunugi Mahao*; presently associated with the Manipuri daily, *Pokhapham*, as Feature Editor; recipient of Thockhom Jogendrajit Memorial Gold Medal by Naharol Sahitya Premee Samiti, Imphal, and Sahitya Akademi Award. Add: Oinam Bazaar, P.O. Nambol 795 134, Manipur.

Narang, Gopi Chand (b.1931) Scholar, critic and linguist in Urdu, English and Hindi; has more than 60 publications to his credit, the most important being *Hindustani Qisson se Makhuz Urdu Masnaviyan* (research), *Amir Khusrau Ka Hindavi Kavya* (research), *Sakhtiyat, Pas-Sakhtiyat, Mashriqi Sheriyat* (literary theory, all Urdu and Hindi), *Urdu Language and Literature* (criticism in English), *Tehreek-e-Azadi aur Urdu Shairi, Urdu par Khulta Daricha* (criticism in Hindi) etc.; President, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi; recipient of numerous awards and honours including Ghalib Award, Amir Khusrau Award, Chicago, Canadian Academy Award, Toronto, Sahitya Akademi Award, Rajiv Gandhi Award for Excellence in Secularism, President of Pakistan's Special Gold Medal, Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, Honorary D. Litt. from University of Hyderabad, Visiting Fellow, Rockefeller Foundation, Fellow, Royal Asiatic Society etc. Add: D-252, Sarvodaya Enclave, Mehrauli Road, New Delhi 110 017.

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Narasimhaswamy, K.S. K.S.Na (1915-2003) Kannada poet; authored more than 24 collections of poetry; a few of his major works are *Mysooru Mallige, Shilalate, Tereda Bagilu* etc.; recipient of many awards including Sahitya Akademi Award, Kumaran Asan Award, Masti Venkatesh Iyengar Literary Award etc. and honours like D. Litt. by Bangalore University; was a Fellow of Sahitya Akademi.

Panne Kunwar (b.1942) Painter; her specialized areas are Indian gods and goddesses; her paintings have been exhibited at Sardul Art Gallery, Bikaner, Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta, Sanskriti Art Gallery, Calcutta and Stuttgart, Germany. Add: 20, Balmukund Macker Road, Kolkata 700 007.

Qadri, Syed Khalid: Taught English at Osmania University, author of a number of articles both in English and Urdu on philosophical studies, linguistics, semiotics and critical and literary theory. Add: 201, Golden Crest, Income Tax Colony, Mehdipatnam, Hayderabad – 28.

Raghunath, M.S. Translates from Kannada into English. Add: HIG-40, 6th Main, KHB Colony, II Stage, Basaveshvara Nagar, Bangalore 560 079.

Rahman, Anisur: Writes criticism in English and Urdu and translates from Urdu into English; has two books on the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das; presently he is Professor of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jamia Nagar, New Delhi 110 025.

Raina, M.L. Eminent Professor of English (now retired) and well-known academic and critic. Add: 78, Sector 8, Panchkula 134 109, Haryana.

Rajlakshmi, N.K. Writes both in Kannada and English and translates from Kannada into English; two of her articles and unpublished theses are important reference material and course material in the Department of Post-Colonial Studies, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil; presently she is a faculty in the Department of English, Mangalore University College, Hampankatte, Mangalore 575001.

Rajkumar, B.S. (b.1958) Manipuri Poet, critic and translator; has more than five books to his credit. Add: Maibam Chingmang, Nambol, Manipur 795 134.

Rathi, Girdhar (b.1944) Hindi poet and critic; translates into English and Hindi; has more than 40 published works including *Bahar Bhitar, Uninde Ki Lori* (poetry), *Uhapoh* (criticism), *Naye Chin Mein Das Din* (travelogue) etc. and an anthology *Survival*, (translations of ten Hindi poets into English) which he co-edited with Daniel Weissbort; formerly Editor,

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Samkalin Bharatiya Sahitya, the bi-monthly Hindi journal of Sahitya Akademi; recipient of Om Prakash Sahitya Samman. Add: YA-4, Sahvikas CGHS, 68, Patparganj, I.P. Extn., Delhi 110 092.

Shefali Debbarma (b.1964) Kokborok poet ; has two collections of poetry to her credit ; she is the recipient of Salil Krishna Smriti Puraskar for her contribution to Kokborok poetry ; she was also invited by the Bangladesh Jatiya Kabita Parishad and participated in Bangladesh Jatiya Kabita Utsav-2004, held in Dhaka. Add: C/o Chandrakanta Murasingh, General Secretary, The North-East India Poetry Council, New Model Village, P.O. Abhoyanagar 799 005, Agartala, Tripura

Shanteswar, Veena: Kannada short-story writer, translates from Kannada into English; she is the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize, 2002 and the Attimabbe Puraskar from the Government of Karnataka. Add: A-1,Principal's Quarters, Karnataka Arts College Campus, Darwad 580 001.

Shivaprakash, H.S. (b.1954) Kannada poet and playwright; winner of Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award etc.; translates from Kannada into English; was formerly Editor, *Indian Literature*; presently teaching aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Add: Associate Professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 110 067.

Sreeraman, C.V. (1933-2007) (See Note on page No. 29). Address of his legal heir: Mrs. Yasoda Sreeraman, W/o Late Sri C.V. Sreeraman, Porkkulam, Kunnamkulam, Thrissur District, Kerala.

Srinivasa, Savitha: Kannada short-story writer; also translates from Kannada into English. Add: No. 123, II Floor, II Cross, II Main, Vivekanagar, Further Extension, Bangalore 560 047.

Swamy, O.L. Nagabhushana Critic and translator; retired as Professor from Kannada University, Hampi. Add: 'Abhyudaya', 115, 13 Cross, Wilson Gardens, Bangalore 560 025

Verma, Anoop (b.1966) Indian English short-story writer and novelist; has one novel, *A Thread of Life* to his credit. Add: A 67/1, DDA (SFS), Flat, Saket, New Delhi 110 017.

Wary, Sikkna John: Translates from Bodo into English. Ad: C/o Anju Narzari, Kokrajar Govt. College, Kokrajar-783 370, Assam.

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IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSIONS....

Here is the Golden Jubilee Special number! It is indeed a proud occasion, and I am deeply aware of its momentousness. I remember here my forebears, including the past editors.

Indian Literature began as a half-yearly journal. There was no designated editor for several years to come, and no editorials, except the "Note" which sets down its objectives in Vol.I, Book.1, that came out in October 1957. K. R. Kripalani's name appears as 'Editor', in the declaration in Form IV, though, and he had obviously stood in, though burdened with his many and multifarious duties as the Secretary Sahitya Akademi. The luminaries on the editorial board from 1957 to 1970 included S.Radhakrishnan and Zakir Husain. Personalities like Humayun Kabir, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Prabhakar Machwe, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Umashankar Joshi, Birendrakumar Bhattacharyya, V. K. Gokak, Gangadhar Gadgil, U R Anantha Murthy, Ramakanta Rath, Gopi Chand Narang and Sunil Gangopadhyay followed in subsequent decades.

From Vol. VIII No.1, January 1965, the journal got a designated editor, Lokenath Bhattacharya. He too wrote no editorials in any of the issues that he edited over the long period of seven years, though he played a pioneering role in developing the journal into a literary magazine, happily swerving away from the stated goals in the inaugural issue. *Indian Literature* had started off, ironically, with the declaration that it would not promote the creative writing in the various Indian literatures for the then valid reasons stated right after. (See the last paragraph of the Note published in this issue)]. With Vol. IX: No.1-Janury 1966, it was converted into a quarterly journal.

Keshav Malik took over as editor from Vol. XV No.4: October 1972, and began writing editorials for the first time. A poet and a critic of literature and art, Keshav Malik perfected the aesthetic evolution of the journal which had been set in motion by Lokenath Bhattacharya. From Vol. IX: January 1976, it was made a bi-monthly journal, with the editor remaking: "With the present number *Indian Literature* is tentatively converted into bi-monthly—with the possibility of its being turned into a monthly at some future date...." After thirty-two years, it remains the same even now. It can, and should, certainly be turned into a monthly. Only then would fuller representation of all recognized literatures—now increased to twenty-four from the then twenty-two—marginal and minority literatures of the country, become possible.

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With Issue No.101 (May-June 1984), S. Balu Rao took over as editor. We realize with an element of customary fatalism that things haven't moved much further even now, on the way to achieving the high goals that he set for the journal in his first editorial (reprinted in this issue). He himself, though, brought about qualitative changes right from the very concept of the journal. He constantly experimented with its structure and ensured better representation. With him, *Indian Literature* can be said to have truly acquired the stature of a modern literary journal on the national level. D. S. Rao who succeeded him in 1988, brought in further improvements. Reaching K. Satchidanandan's time (1992-1996), one witnesses the culmination of all that has been achieved so far in the existence of the journal. H. S. Shiva Prakash set out to push the goals further still. Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee made explorations of his own. And I stand poised to make fresh attempts, and have the advantage of drawing sustenance from the advice of all the living past editors, and the facility to fall back on the experience of the others through the archival material available here.

The living past editors have contributed articles for the present issue, describing how they ran the journal and also giving their views as to how it can be run better. It is among these articles that the "Note" excerpted from the first issue and the first editorial of S. Balu Rao have been reproduced. All these go into the mapping of the existence of the journal over the last five decades. Charting out the course for the future is what is to be done now.

At the risk of facing the charge of whipping a dead horse, I feel compelled to mention here the furore that broke out when Salman Rushdie came out a decade ago with the argument that there aren't many works in the regional languages of India that can excel Indian writing in English. It was rather a storm that erupted in the subcontinent, the gales of which subsided only recently and some of its winds sigh still. The indignation generated by this affront on the literary sensibility of a confident nation surging ahead in all fields was understandable. But that was not the case half a century ago. Though modernity had dawned in Indian regional literatures in the early decades of the last century, and had, almost simultaneously, taken up the cause of the nationalist movement and themselves developed tremendously in the process, each literature projecting the vision of a free, glorious Indian nation—although in actual fact the country was fragmented into several hundred little kingdoms—most of these regional literatures had not in fact consciously come up on the world

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scenario. The confidence that Indian literatures were worthy of standing on their own feet along with the world's best, was not there even at the conceptual level. We were happy with where we were; Tagore's Nobel Prize had given a fillip to the national pride, and sustained it for nearly half a century; but that had to sadly substitute for any kind of real evaluation and awareness of the worth of one's own literatures. It was about this time that *Indian Literature* was conceived and founded, in October 1957, with the express purpose of making the nation aware of the existence of the various rich literatures of the linguistic regions of India. When it completes its half century of existence, the development and growth a number of our regional languages have registered can be measured by the number of excellent translations they have produced in English which helped those literatures, in turn, to be catapulted onto the world stage. *Indian Literature* can proudly claim the role of the beacon for all such translation activities. Truly, *Indian Literature* is *the* journal of Indian Literature in English Translation, the brand new discipline several of our universities have adopted recently, and which is being taken up by many more.

As a fitting finale to the Golden Jubilee celebrations of *Indian Literature*, an all-India Literary Translation Competition had been organized, the results of which were announced in the previous issue. In this Golden Jubilee Issue, we carry all the prize-winning entries (first, second, third and five consolation prizes in three genres) as announced in the advertisement. It is interesting to note that almost half the prize-winning entries are translations from Bengali. The entries by winners of one-year free subscription will be published in subsequent issues on a priority basis.

The basic idea for the translation competition first came from my predecessor Sri Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee; Sri Agrahara Krishna Murthy developed from there and gave it the present form. I thank both for their leadership and guidance. The idea of getting the former editors to write about *Indian Literature* was also Sri Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee's, and his guidance throughout the three issues IL 239, 240 and 241 which he guest-edited, has been valuable for me, topping off the five years of his grooming me when I served as Assistant Editor under him. Prof. H.S. Shiva Prakash, his predecessor, my first editor at *Indian Literature*, takes the credit for breaking me in, and giving me full freedom in the journal. The late Sri Balu Rao, who changed, for the better, the face of *Indian Literature* beyond recognition for the first time in its history until then, is specially remembered through his first editorial that is reprinted in this issue.

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Kumaran Asan, the poet who almost single-handedly revolutionised Malayalam poetry, epitomizes the modern Malayalee who moves out of Kerala, travels around and enriches the literature and culture of Kerala through experiences gained in the wider world outside. A prominent disciple of the pre-eminent spiritual leader and social reformer Sree Narayana Guru, Asan, during his formative phase, lived for three-and-a-half years in Bangalore, Chennai and Kolkata, learning Sanskrit. During his sojourn in Kolkata he had begun to develop a deep interest in Buddhism as well. As a result, most of the Khanda Kavyas he composed during the short span of his creative career—a little more than two decades, when death by drowning cut him short at the comparatively young age of fifty-one—were set in locales outside Kerala. Kumaran Asan is remembered on the centenary of his writing *Oru Veena Poovu* (*A Fallen Blossom*, 1907), which served as a harbinger of modernism in Malayalam poetry. To quote Ayyappa Paniker, "*Oru Veena Poovu* combines the lyrical and the elegiac with the romantic. Yet the relaxed discipline of a classical training was always there to add a deeper tone to his (Asan's) close investigation of the meaning of life as seen in the brief career of a flower. The infinite delicacy of touch...was rare in Malayalam poetry at that time." Celebrations of the centenary year of *Oru Veena Poovu* had begun some time ago at the initiative of several prominent Malayalam literary enthusiasts and organisations, which concluded in November 2007, at the completion of exactly a century after the composition of this poem. Rizio Yohannan Raj's rendering of this poem in contemporary English idiom, which we carry in this issue, along with her essay on Asan and the relevance of this poem will prove to be a timely tribute, it is hoped.

I invite you all, dear readers, to the exciting future, past this moment of glory in the life of *Indian Literature*.

A.J. Thomas
Editor

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Editorial Note

Ever since the Sahitya Akademi was inaugurated in March 1954 there has been a demand at every meeting of the General Council that the Akademi should publish a journal which might help in disseminating useful information about literary activities in the various Indian languages. Lack of resources—not merely financial—did not make an earlier implementation of this proposal feasible. It was felt that the Akademi newly founded and without any precedents in this country to guide it should be modest in its immediate programme and cautious in extending it. New ventures may be taken in hand only if and when its resources permit and proper literary contacts are established and an adequate working staff trained.

The present venture is thus neither hasty nor ambitious. The journal will for the present be published twice a year. Later on if it is found to serve a useful purpose it may be made quarterly.

The journal is not intended to be a new competitor in the field of literary journalism. Since it aims at supplying information which is not easily available in other publications, no other existing journal is likely to suffer by its appearance. Needless to say, it will not serve as a mouthpiece of any particular literary isms, for the Sahitya Akademi does not presume to guide or instruct creative writers. The Akademi's aim is a modest one—to help writers and readers in the various languages of India to know each other better. It is unfortunately true that we in India suffer from and are handicapped by our ignorance about ourselves. As things are, a Bengali poet or writer is likely to know a great deal about Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot or Jean-Paul Sartre while knowing almost nothing or next to nothing about poets and writers in, say, Tamil or Malayalam or perhaps even in Hindi. The same is no doubt true of writers in every language. What is even more regrettable is that ignorance breeds contempt and some of our writers are apt to imagine that nothing worth reading is being written in any Indian language save their own.

There are fortunately some journals and literary organizations that

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This is the first Editorial which appeared in Vol I, No. 1, Oct. 1957.

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are honestly and bravely trying to dispel the mists of this ignorance. Some enterprising publishers too are helping in this process by publishing translations from one Indian language into others. This is, however, a colossal task and any additional efforts in this direction are welcome. The present journal is one such humble effort. In fact the greater part of Sahitya Akademi's activities is devoted to the same purpose.

There seems to be a misconception in the minds of some writers regarding the role of the Sahitya Akademi. They seem to think that the Akademi having been founded by the State is necessarily under the control of the Government and is nothing but a camouflaged organ of propaganda and patronage. These writers who are earnest advocates of freedom of individual creative expression—as all writers and indeed all in intelligent human beings should be—are therefore suspicious of the Akademi's expanding programme of activities and have a genuine fear that it may strangle rather than help true literary expression. This fear is, however, groundless. The fact is that the Government of India have not in any way interfered with the activities of the Sahitya Akademi since its inception in 1954 and have allowed it to function as an autonomous body, free to formulate its policy and evolve its literary programme. The only check exercised by the Government—and it is a legitimate and desirable check—is on financial expenditure. Since the Government meets the expenses of the Akademi, it is not only its right but its duty to see that public funds are not mis-spent. The Akademi's budget is therefore subject to Government sanction and its accounts are regularly audited by the Auditor General's office. Except for this there is no other interference or pressure from the Government side.

No organisation—individual efforts apart—can function effectively without funds contributed either by State or by public charity or subscription. It would be naive to assume that an organisation or a journal financed by some rich patron or patrons or receiving help, direct or indirect, from rich trusts and agencies in foreign countries, must necessarily be a better guardian of public virtue than an organization financed by the State. The only genuine certificate of an organisation's *bona fides* is the way it actually functions. We would therefore request all our writers to judge the Akademi by its activities and each activity strictly on its merits. To judge institutions by their birth more than by their actions can be as misleading as the old-fashioned emphasis on birth in the case of the individual.

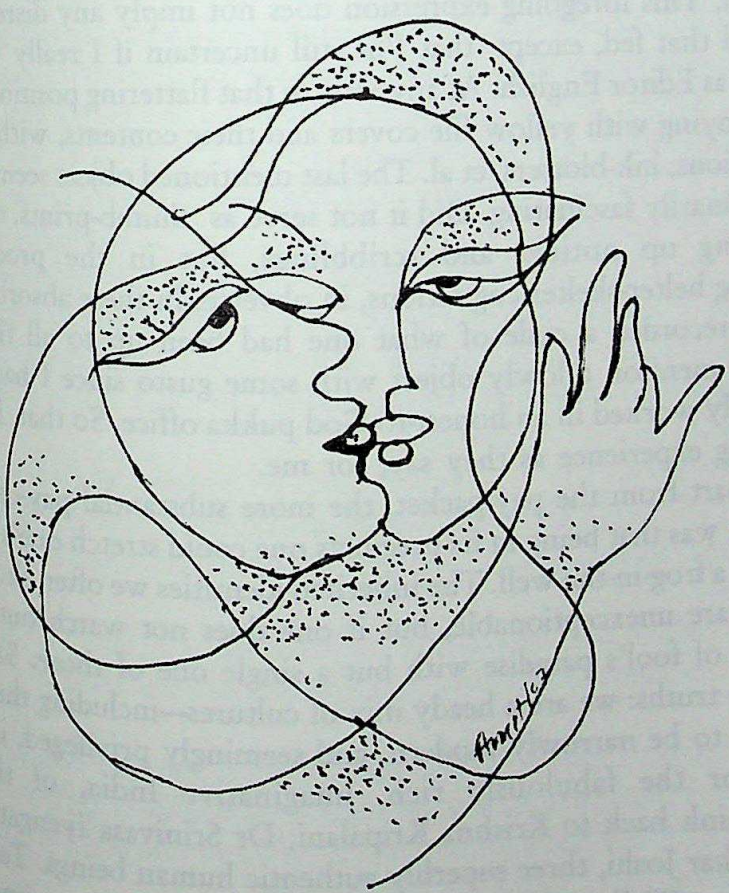
The pages of this journal will bear witness to the nature and scope of the Akademi's work and since this work is concerned mainly with co-ordinating literary activities in the various Indian languages and supplying

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and propagating information regarding them, the aim of the journal is modest and limited. It is not a forum for creative literary expression, for such a journal in India can only be in the Indian languages and, fortunately, there is no dearth of them. It is not—though its name may suggest a resemblance—in any respect like the journals published by some foreign countries in which the current stories and poems of their writers are translated and published serially in English for the benefit of foreign readers. Its contents are informative rather than creative or critical and their interest will therefore be limited. Nevertheless the information supplied is of permanent value and needs to be recorded somewhere.

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The Hand That Fed

Keshav Malik

Surely each life is fit material for a comedy, at least mine is. A final act in passage! And, in this comedy, my days at the Sahitya Akademi were fun. This foregoing expression does not imply any disrespect for the hand that fed, except that I'm still uncertain if I really was good material as Editor English. At any rate, in that flattering position I found myself toying with yellow file covers and their contents, with staplers, pin-cushions, ink-blotters, et al. The last mentioned object seemed to me extraordinarily fascinating. Did it not serve as thumb-prints, or almost so—drying up notings and scribblings, but in the process also mirroring helter-skelter cogitations, in obverse. In these absorbents was perhaps recorded a code of what one had been up to all through a tenure. I mention a lowly object with some gusto since I had not till then really worked in an honest-to-God pukka office. So that, here, was a learning experience as they say, for me.

Apart from the pay-packet, the more substantial pay-off for me at the SA was that being in its precincts one could stretch one's feathers, be less of a frog-in-the-well. The inherited identities we often shout aloud in India are unexceptionable, but if one does not watch out we live in a sort of fool's paradise with but a single one of those. SA taught me home truths: we are a heady mix of cultures—including the literary ones. So, to be narrowly modern, and seemingly privileged, is to lose a feel for the fabulously rich, imaginative India, of the past.

I think back to Krishna Kripalani, Dr Srinivasa Iyengar and Dr Umashankar Joshi, three superbly authentic human beings. To me, SA meant them. Well, to be with the likes of them even for moments was to be in luck. And, oh yes, there was Dr Sitanshu Yashaschandra with whom I struck up deep friendship. This happy meeting too was thanks to SA. Dr Yashaschandra who is like an intellectual rudder to me, to

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date. So that a broad, unassuming humanism in practice, is what SA and its house organs like *Indian Literature* are potentially capable of.

Thus I would say an aye to SA and any among the SA staff that worked with genuine enthusiasm.

I have been somewhat of a vagrant wavering in between the different arts as of course the art of 'inking'. I believe that in having been in the precincts of Rabindra Bhavan was fruitful for me despite any actual or imagined pin-pricks. If the SA feasted my mind, the other arts' academics pleasured me with well-tuned sounds, the rhythmic forms. Yes, we need food of more than one kind to be in health. Even so, and finally, it was SA as was home, in that it was here alone that one's own chosen muse would be lent an ear by one's masters in the art. Selfishness?

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Dear Reader,

The *Indian Literature*, the Akademi's bi-monthly journal in English, has now a new Editor in the undersigned. He takes the place of the erstwhile Editor, Sri Keshav Malik, who has retired.

IL is the only journal of its kind in India, devoted as it is to the promotion of not one or two, but all the literatures of the country, some twenty plus in number. Besides other things, it enjoys the distinction of uninterrupted publishing for over twenty-seven years now. Editing a journal of its kind can be an exciting job, no less challenging and demanding.

What is the journal about? What are its aims and objectives? And the tasks before it? The parameters, inbuilt in its very name, are clear and definite. First, it is 'Literature', and on and about it. Secondly it is 'Indian', i.e., 'Indian Literature', not English or American or European or any other literature,

As for the tasks: In a country with such a formidable number of languages and literatures, ranging in antiquity anywhere from a few centuries to more than a millennium and each a rich repository itself–

To bring them closer to each other, all on a single platform, by breaking the barrier of languages;

To discover the very best in each by putting one's fingers at the right spot where the life-blood throbs, and convey them through sensitive translations, creating, in the process, a band of dedicated and competent translators;

To collect and disseminate information, and interpret it through critical assessments so as to have meaning and relevance to other literatures also;

To explore and highlight the common features which bind and unite the various literatures, at the same time not ignoring the differences which make for infinite variety within a common unity as in a multi-petalled rose;

And, not being content with a mere thousand-odd readers in a

This is the first Editorial by Late Sri S. Balu Rao in IL No. 101: May-June, 1984 Vol. XXVII, No. 3

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country of crores, to aim at dispersing all this treasure to the vast majority of people by continually expanding one's circumference from that still centre of belief, till every Indian writer is avidly read in every Indian home, accepted and owned as its own.

Yes, even for broad guide-lines, these are ambitions. But how can there be any achievement without ambition?

Achievement can come only through change. And it is true of *IL*, too. It does not take more than a glance to see that the change is coming. It is there, visible and palpable, like 'a berry on one's palm,' as the Sanskrit saying goes. But, the change should not merely restrict itself to the externals only, to a daub of colour or change of a typeface. It should essentially be seminal, emanating from the heart of the roots and permeating to the entire form and content in all their range and quality to the last minutest detail. A discerning mind cannot fail to sense that such a change is already on its way. Gradually but surely, let us hope, the change will be total.

It is here that the new Editor needs the good wishes, in the shape of active involvement and participation, of all of you—the writers and the readers—who believe in the Magic Word and in its ability to transform the mind and life of the people. It is a long voyage

on the vast, turbulent sea
a little boat
and its will.

S. Balu Rao
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Looking Back

D S Rao

In the tenth year of the country's Independence from the British rule, Sahitya Akademi, founded as 'a national organization to work actively' for 'Indian languages', launched *Indian Literature,* in English. The reason is not far to seek. The Akademi's pioneers knew the purpose of language is communication. Members of the General Council and the Executive Board, who were great writers in their own languages, spoke mostly in English at the meetings: even staunch Hindi loyalists like Hazari Prasad Dwivedi and Ramdhari Singh 'Dinkar' did. And as the Akademi President Jawaharlal Nehru, Vice-President Radhakrishnan and Secretary Krishna Kripalani were all writers in English, the obvious choice for the Akademi's first journal was English.

I came to admire Krishna Kripalani, the founder editor of *Indian Literature*, for his meticulous planning and execution. He would go through every article, word by word, before sending it to press. He had hand-written articles typed, read, retyped, and reread: there were no computers then. He was clear that the editorial privilege did not extend to revising articles without the consent of the authors. If an article required editing, he sent the edited version back to the author, mentioning the editorial suggestions were only meant for the author's consideration and the article would be published as finalized by the author. In spite of busy schedules, he also found time to read even the proofs.

After seven years, in 1964, Lokenath Bhattacharya, a senior staff editor of the USIS magazine, *Span*, became the editor of *IL*: He changed the cover and the page design. Eight years later, in 1972, Keshav Malik, the editor of *Thought,* succeeded him: he concentrated on the content and encouraged new writers. After twelve years, in 1984, S. Balu Rao, editor in Kannada and English, took over: he paid attention both to the content and the looks. Four years later, in 1988, I succeeded him

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and edited twenty numbers. Here I share some of my experiences, a few issues I had to face and a suggestion or two for its future.

For a little over three decades, the journal used to be printed by letterpress, which meant tedious proofreading of galleys and pages, over and over. Only in the eighties, offset printing, then far more expensive than letterpress, was partly used for the *IL*, for the cover or an occasional pullout. The cover moved from sober tints of the earlier years to multi-colour reproductions of paintings, requiring attention to tonal detail. Once I persuaded the well-known painter Nand Katyal, then Art Director of the *Span*, to go with me to the press and help supervise the printing of two of his paintings on the cover (Nov-Dec 1990). He spent a full day with me in the Vimal Offset press. Only when by the end of the day he had explained the intricacies of colour reproduction by offset process and said that we could never capture the exact quality of the original in the reproduction but only come as close as possible, was I reassured that we had put in our very best for the painter and the journal. One problem that I, as the editor, shared with my predecessors was the quality of English written by some of the contributors, whose mother tongue was another language in which they excelled. Since they came from all over India, the variation in their English usage tested the editorial limits. In the years following Independence, it was deemed almost unpatriotic to write in English: the Constitution of India declared Hindi as the official language and no efforts were spared to throw English out of the country. Predicted the novelist Manohar Malgonkar, in the seventies: 'The sort of English we do write nowadays is not going to be written even ten years from now.'

His forecast turned out wrong, fortunately for Indian English: the novel of the eighties was, in the words of Ranga Rao, 'snob's treat, critic's delight, publisher's joy' accepted 'everywhere in the world.' But, Amaresh Datta thought 'the recent spurt in the creative writing in English by the Indian authors may have something to do with the political culture of our time...a kind of hot-house plant, sometimes blessed with comely flowers but still deprived of the sap and sunshine of the soil.' Yet, the success of the eighties. Indian English continues...from Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh...to Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai... Nonetheless, the debate, mother tongue versus English, raged during my tenure and I published a symposium (Sep-Oct 1991), in which nine authors, who wrote both in their mother tongue and English, shared their experiences.

In the Great Masters series of Doordarshan, Vijay Raghav Rao, the flute soloist and pioneer in orchestration of Indian music (earlier featured in the Akademi series 'Men and Books'), was asked, in 1991, how the

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purist in him reconciled with the celluloid music of commercial cinema. He replied there were only two kinds of cinema: good and bad; a commercial film was not bad simply because it was commercial, nor an experimental film good simply because it was experimental. Extending his observation to literature, we may as well say: there are only two kinds of writing: good and bad; the language in which it is written hardly matters.

A year earlier, an Australian writer on a visit to India, doing a programme for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, asked me: 'Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize in 1913. We are now in 1990. India is a vast country, with several languages and literatures. But for over seven decades, India has not been able to produce a single great writer who could win the Nobel Prize. What do you think are the reasons?' I countered, 'Do you think all the Nobel Prize winners are great writers? And have all great writers won the Nobel Prize?' And mentioned some masters missed by the Swedish Academy: Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorki, Emile Zola, Marcel Proust, August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, Thomas Hardy, Mark Twain...

My visitor who was on the defensive, admitted Australia fared no better. There had been only one Australian Nobel Prize winner for Literature: Patrick White. I pointed out that the literary scene in India was more complex than in Australia. We had, then, fifteen national languages listed in the Constitution of the country, to which Sahitya Akademi added seven. All these twenty-two languages had varying publishing levels, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The Swedish Academy had to base its judgment mostly on English translations of Asian literatures. In spite of the fact that English was taught all over the country and was the medium of higher education in most Universities, good English translations of significant Indian literary works were hard to come by. It was a double irony that despite the cultivation of English for over two centuries, we had not been able to build up an adequate cadre of literary translators into English; on the other hand, excellent original writing in English by Indians was on the increase, even as the English teaching standards were on the decline.

The scene in the first decade of the twenty-first century is not very different. The problem for the *IL* is indeed acute, for it needs quality literary translators and writers in English from twenty-three languages.

One incident that raised a controversy in the early eighties was a contribution of mine to *IL*: a book review! I reviewed two of the 1981 Akademi Award-winning books: Jayanta Mahapatra's English poem, *Relationship* and V. R. Narla's Telugu play *Sita Josyam* (May-June 1982).

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While Mahapatra took the critical review in his stride, Narla did not. And he wanted his reply published in the *IL*; and he demanded that his response should put an end to the discussion of his book in the journal; no rejoinder from the reviewer or comment from anyone else should be entertained. His reply was published in the *IL*, but his request to put a ban on further discussion of the book in the journal was not formally accepted by the Akademi. President Umashankar Joshi reminded Narla of Voltaire's wise words ('I disagree with what you say, but I'll fight to the last for your right to say so') and hoped that Narla, himself a distinguished journalist, editor and writer, would uphold the cardinal principle of freedom of expression. All the same, I was neither invited, nor allowed, to respond to Narla's reply in the *IL*; also, my contributions, earlier accepted by the editor for publication, were quietly returned to me. Yet, Narla was not placated: he declined the Award.

The issue was deliberated all over the country. While some thought the Akademi should not have published, in its own journal, an adverse review, and that too by a staff editor, of an Award-winning book, others raised the debate to the level of freedom of expression; the Akademi should not suppress but encourage criticism; they pointed out that it was prominently mentioned in the very issue carrying the controversial review: 'Articles published in the magazine do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of Sahitya Akademi, but are offered here as representative examples of opinion on subjects of literary interest.' K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, former Vice-President of the Akademi, remarked, half in jest: 'While Narla got a lot of unnecessary publicity, DS Rao got necessary publicity!' His comment proved prophetic: soon the very articles and reviews returned to me by the editor of the *IL* were published in *The Indian Express, The Patriot, The Hindustan Times*... And, in 1988, I became the editor of the *IL*!

The declaration of the Akademi Awards is received with cheers or jeers, but never with indifference. Every writer has admirers and detractors. (Even the venerable Valmiki is no exception!) There is no last word in the republic of letters. During my tenure, the *IL* devoted one issue every year to the Akademi Award-winning books: giving publication details, picture of each winner, excerpt from the Award citation, review, and extract from the book. At one stage, to stimulate discussion, I toyed with the idea of publishing two reviews of each Award book, one favourable, another adverse. In reading the chosen books – or the excerpts in translation and reviews presented in the *IL* – the readers' attention was drawn to the good old advice of Francis Bacon: 'Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and

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discourse, but to weigh and consider. Bringing out in one issue excerpts and reviews of the Akademi Award-winning books in a year is hard but of immense value: in one place we have a glimpse of the new literature in all languages of the nation.

Equally demanding but of great value is a survey of the literary scene in each language, initiated by the first editor, Krishna Kripalani; it became an annual feature and continued for years, with occasional omissions. This feature was criticized by some and welcomed by others. Critics said that it was impossible for anyone, however diligent, to take note of all the books published in a year, evaluate their relative merits and discern patterns; at best, such articles were selective and informative; at worst, eclectic and misleading; one year was too brief a period to detect trends, and the very proximity prevented the distancing necessary for a sober view. Agreed, said the others, but it was better, to have some survey, with all its limitations, than to have none at all, especially when such basic information was available nowhere else.

Taking both the viewpoints into account, a slight variation was introduced during my editorship. The articles were to be planned in two parts: one, a brief overview of the year in about four pages, mainly for the benefit of readers not directly acquainted with the language; two, a descriptive bibliography of about thirty significant books of the year. Instead of giving all the (then) twenty-two surveys in one number, they were to be distributed over the year, preferably zone-wise.

IL received a large number of books for review, in English and other languages. As it was not possible to have all of them reviewed, a new feature was introduced in 1990: '*IL* Listings', giving basic details of the books received.

Listings and annual descriptive bibliographies of books in the languages have another value, not directly related to the journal: they help in building lists of likely contenders for Akademi Awards. And, if a perforated form is printed in the *IL* for proposing books, in original or in translation, for consideration of Award Committees, it will help the staff quickly locate and order books; it will also help build the Akademi libraries, both at Delhi and its Regional Offices. It might, incidentally, boost the circulation figures of the *IL*.

Indian Literature was started as a six-monthly; became in due course a quarterly: and a bimonthly. It will soon, I hope, become a monthly, eagerly awaited by authors and readers for wealth of information from all languages of the country; a taste of high quality creative and critical writing; clash of views; and adventure of thought. ❑

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Shaping "Indian Literature"

K. Satchidanandan

My association with *Indian Literature* is more than forty years old.I became a subscriber to the journal, then a half-yearly, as soon as I finishd my formal education.I also got the available back issues.There was no journal comparable to that in English at that time, and I doubt whether there is another journal playing that role even now. True, there have been attempts, like *Indian Writing Today* edited by Prabhu Padhye that ran for some time of which again I was a reader, and of course *Vagarth*, edited by Meenakshi Mukherjee that had a longer life compared to *Indian Writing Today*. Now there is *The Little Magazine* edited by Antara Dev Sen and Pratik Kanjilal, a beautifully produced quarterly carrying a lot of very good writing, in the original and in well-edited translations. There have also been a lot of journals in between, published by small groups of writers, NGOs, newspaper groups, government organisations, university departments, why, even individuals, like *The Illustrated Weekly of India, Varnamala, Indian Horizons, IIC Quarterly, The New Quest, The Brown Critique, Chandrabhaga, Indian Panorama, Kampf, Contour, Scoria, Mimamsa, Lyric, Haribam, Pratik, Sarasa, Atlas, Kavyabharati, Beyond Borders* and several others including the journals in English brought out by the State Akademis like *Malayalam Literary Survey* and *Aniketana* and other language-specific journals like *Urdu Alive* and *Yaatra* that have been publishing translations from languages. (I am not discussing the language journals devoted to translation here.) But none of these can compare with *Indian Literature* for various reasons: *Indian Literature* has been consistently publishing translations from all the recognised—and some of the unrecognised—languages of India; it has been coming out regularly for the last 50 years; it has been comprehensive in its approach, in covering languages and genres, with periodical surveys and regular book reviews and it has striven to constantly innovate itself in form and content, why, even in its periodicity! In short

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it has shown remarkable range and resilience and has from time to time reflected the emerging trends in India's vast literay landscape and the unity as well as the diversity of Indian letters. One may say by way of complaint that the quality of translations has not been even: but that is again a reflection of the general standards: we hardly have good translators in many of the languages of India. Even today with all the talk about English education that is supposedly stifling the Indian languages (while it can, in bilinguals, be a great tool to propagate literatures in the languages as has been proved by many from A. K. Ramanujan and R.Parthasarathy to Jayanta Mahapatra and Vinay Dharwadkar) the situation is not very different since many of the English literature students are not proficient in their mother tongues.

I became a contributor to the journal during the late Balu Rao's editorship, and was persuaded by the late Ayyappa Paniker to take up the editorship myself in 1992. I remember Sisir Kumar Das had headed the selection committee; I had so far edited only little magazines in Malayalam like *Jwala* and *Utharam* and been associated with the whole Little Magazine Movement in Kerala as adviser, partner and contributor. I had little faith in bigger commercial journals even though I was often persuaded to contribute to them as I knew they could not usher in anything new in literature with their commercial motive that forced them to play to the status quo. I was part of the avant-garde and the main challenge I had to face while taking up the editorship of *Indian Literarture* which anyway was an establishment journal was how to match my avant-garde instincts with the established and well-known principles and purposes of the journal. This very conflict in fact was the fountain spring of my inspiration and this was what drove me to all the modest innovations I brought about in the journal during the almost five years of my editorship.

By the time I took over as editor in its thirtyfifth year, *Indian Literature* had become a bimonthly, passing through a quarterly phase in between. Running a bimonthly journal of Indian writing maintaining some semblance of quality was no easy mission: it meant getting in touch with known writers and translators, discovering new and emerging ones, following the current trends in all the genres including criticism, and of course giving the journal a special individual touch through the innovations in form, content and the style of editing—without which all the losses I had suffered in coming over from Kerala to Delhi leaving my professor's job and my popularity among the younger readers and activists (it was almost like dying : one day my photographs, statements and reports about my speeches — almost one per day — suddenly vanishing from the newspapers, my fellow-writers, activist-friends, colleagues and students missing my

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benevolent and irritating presence among them as companion and critic!) would have gone unjustified. My exposure to Indian writers in all the languages through the reading of their work in English or Malayalam translations and through direct interaction, especially during the conferences and literary festivals at Bharat Bhavan conceived by Ashok Vajpeyi — with which I had a long and fruitful association — came to my help. I was also not entirely alien as a writer to the community of writers and readers in other languages as my poetry had been translated into several languages including English and Hindi much before my joining the Sahitya Akademi as the editor of its English journal. This too was a source of confidence.

I had brought with me great dreams about making *Indian Literature* a vibrant journal that would focus more on the contemporary trends even while not forgetting the past. This was a challenge, but also an opportunity for someone who had had to wind up his own magazines chiefly due to financial strain. Here the problems were at least going to be different. From the beginning, thanks to Indra Nath Choudhury's openness of approach, I was given the freedom necessray to fashion the journal the way I wanted. With U. R. Anantha Murthy, a senior friend, taking over as President of the Akademi, the atmosphere became even more congenial.

Those who have gone through the twentynine issues of the journal I edited (from150 to 178) will have noticed the changes I was trying to bring about. I had quoted Tukaram's lines in Dilip Chitre's translation as a prologue to my first editorial : "Words are the only /Jewels I possess/ Words are the only/Clothes I wear/Words are the only food/That sustains my life/Words are the only wealth/I distribute among people"(I adopted these lines almost as the Akademi's motto later as I took over as its executive head). The frank editorial titled *The Sun on the Threshold : A Sharing of Dreams* said : "Thirtyfive is a crucial age in the life of a magazine as in that of a man : a time for retrospection, probable remorse and potential renewal, for a return to the original goals set by the pioneers. *Indian Literature* has not been insensitive to the shifting scenario of our life and letters; still one cannot help feeling that it has a long way to go to be an authentic reflection of the advanced creative and critical sensibility of the country. Our finest writers, young and old alike, have no doubt been alive to the major social, cultural and spiritual issues thrown up by our predicament and are striving today to shape an idiom that is simultaneously contemporary and indigenous. The age of 'high Modernism', an essentially Eurocentric nonetheless innovative literary phenomenon, is past in most of the Indian languages. The quest is on for novel yet domestic

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forms of perception and narration that will best express the moral and spiritual concerns of responsible literature today : the erosion of individual liberty, the loss of identity, the corruption of public life, the communal hysteria, the diverse forms of structural oppression based on caste, race, class and gender, the ecological havoc wrought by man's hubris and greed, the absurdity of war. The heteroglossia of post-Modernism springs from its multidimensional engagement with a hydra-headed reality. *Indian Literature* cannot obviously be an exclusively avant-garde journal; yet it cannot be unresponsive to the aspirations of our emergent writing. At the same time, it wants to benefit from the sagacity of our veteran writers who have captured in blood and tears the traumas and tensions of our recent history." If it sounds like a manifesto, it was one. The editorial also promised special numbers with accent on regional languages and emerging subaltern movements like the Dalit and Feminist movements besides interviews with writers and critical assessments of contemporary trends, and concluded echoing Dylan Thomas's line, 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light.' I called these editorials 'Reflections' so that they could go beyond what was in each issue and take up literary and theoretical issues for discussion. I renamed the column 'A Letter from the Publisher' when H. S. Shiv Prakash took over as Editor following my appointment as Secretary.

It is upto the readers to say how much I could fulfil the promises I had made in that first editorial; but I did strive hard. I myself interviewed Mulk Raj Anand for my second issue where he spoke of his work at length and qualified the Dalit and Feminist movements as the contemporary faces of the Progressive Movement. Other interviews followed like the one E.V. Ramakrishnan did with Kedarnath Singh, Pankaj K. Singh with Bhisham Sahni, Prabhat Kumar Pandeya with Nissim Ezekiel, P. P. Ravindran, with Kamala Das and K.M. Sherrif with Harish Mangalam, the Gujarati Dalit writer. I also introduced short novels and plays which had so far found no place in the journal. The short stories and poems began to be illustrated by different artists. The mast-head and the contents-page were radically altered and the whole magazine was redesigned, thanks to the efforts of my artist-friend Madhusudhanan who did it out of sheer love for me and the desire to transform the look of the journal. With the Issue No. 165 the size of the journal too was changed from crown octavo to demy octavo so that it could be in tune with the Hindi journal and accommodate more material. I would visit all the painting exhibitions in the Mandi House area and elsewhere to identify the paintings that could make good covers for the journal. Besides old masters like Ravivarma and new masters like Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, G.R. Santosh,

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Anjoli Ela Menon, Viswanathan, R.N. Pasricha, etc. I featured a lot of younger painters who have later got established as important artists.

I used my personal contacts with writers in the languages to get the latest information and asked them to help me obtain translations. At times they helped in planning the special numbers on languages: I particularly remember the help from Venkat Swaminathan in Tamil, Chandrakant Patil in Marathi, late B.C. Ramachandra Sharma in Kannada, Pradip Acharya in Assamiya, Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee in Bengali, Amarendra Dasari in Telugu, Renu Mohan Bhan in Kashmiri and M. Asaduddin in Urdu who assisted me with the concerned language issues. The Special issues included, among others, issues on Contemporary Hindi Poetry, Hindi Fiction, Malayalam Fiction, Women's Writing, Gujarati Dalit Literature, Young Indian Poetry, Literary Criticism: The New Challenges, Tamil Writing Today, The Art of Translation, Remembering A. K. Ramanujan, Bengali Short Stories, Telugu Writing Today, Kannada Short Story Today, Urdu Writing Today, Oriya Short Story, Assamese Poetry and Kashmiri Fiction. There were many symposia like the one on 'Indian Writing at the End of the Century', 'Orality and Litearture' and 'From the Progressive to the Post-Modern'; there were too issues devoted to annual surveys of writing in the languages and reviews of books that had won the Akademi awards. (I remember how I got a damning review of a Kashmiri award-winning book done by my friend Shafi Shauq. Probably he was right about the book: all the award-winning books need not be outstanding since all languages do not necessarily produce a book worthy of the Akademi award every year and still the overgenerous selection committees decide to award some book to ward off possible criticism from the writers in their languages. Yet publishing a negative review of a book that had won its Award — in its own journal — would have embarassed the Akademi; so I had to request the reviewer to get the review published elsewhere.) I also launched some new columns like 'Perspectives' for introducing new critical perspectives, 'The Second Tradition' to feature classical poetry, 'Recall' for oral lore, 'The Creative Upsurge' to look at the current liteary scenario in the languages, 'In Focus' for interviews and special articles on writers who have won major awards like Jnanpith Puraskar and Saraswati Samman, 'In Memoriam' for obituaries, 'One Text, One Reading' to feature textual criticism that analysed a single poem or short story which was also published along with the study and 'Revaluations' for new evaluations of older texts. Another fresh attempt was to set apart a few pages for writers from other Asian countries. This column called 'Neighbours' featured writers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, etc. I also wanted to introduce other little magazines to the enlightened

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readers of *Indian Litearture*. Journals featured dozens of such literay journals.

The new things I tried to do obviously reflected the new directions I wanted the journal — perhaps the Akademi too — to take. The emphasis on the young was one new feature. One of my happiest recollections about my association with the journal is my having featured, mostly for the first time, several young writers, many of whom later gained great recognition. Suketu Mehta is just one example, and there were poets who went on to win the British Council Poetry Prize and other recognitions. Another new accent was the emerging writing by women as also by Dalit writers. In the 'Second Tradition' I mostly featured the oppositional tradition — like that of the Bhakti poets – that co-existed with the 'first tradition' in Indian literature. I also tried to improve the general quality of translations, though I cannot claim complete success there; only I worked hard on the translations to make them worthy of publication.

I was surprised and glad to see that 'Reflections', my short semi-academic editorials attracted a lot of readers who let me know their appreciation directly and through mail. Even now I keep meeting people who recall some of them. The reason may be that those editorials touched upon a range of topics of current literay relevance and tried to make some sense of the ongoing debates without compromising my own views on the issue. The pieces selected from them formed a section of my book *Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions* that also carried many of my papers and talks as did my next book, *Authors, Texts, Issues*. In fact the years I spent as the editor of *Indian Literature* were some of the most intense years of my intellectual inquiry. I who had come from an English literature background with a Doctorate in post-Structuralism, now found myself engaging with India's great literatures, reading as many texts as possible, forming my own views and expressing them in my articles published in different journals, in papers presented at seminars and talks given at Universities. It was also a gratifying experience to hold classes on Indian literature for teachers from across India at CCRT, to speak about it to the Indian Foreign Service trainees at ICCR and to introduce related topics to English teachers in the Universities seldom initiated into the subtler aspects of our literatures. All this was made possible by the rare insights provided me by my stint as editor at the Akademi.

Later the same experience came in handy as I took over as Secretary of the Akademi and anyone can see that as Secretary I was trying to put into practice some of the ideas I had developed as the editor of *Indian Literature* – the new platforms I created for young writers (Mulaqat), for marginalised writers including women (Asmita), for interdisciplinary

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discourses (Antaral), poets (Kavisandhi), story writers (Kathasandhi),for translators (Kavi-Anuvadak), and for literature in performance (Avishkar), the many books and anthologies I edited, the various seminars I had conceptualised especially for the annual Festival of Letters, new projects I had planned like *The Encyclopedia of Indian Poetics* and *Companions to Indian Literature*, the archive of Indian literature I developed, the national conferences of women writers, *adivasi* writers and Dalit writers... all these were direct offshoots of the lessons I had learnt as the editor of *Indian Literature*. What I had said in my note of farewell in the last issue edited by me, "It has been, I must admit, a pleasant apprenticeship and the training I received in my unit is sure to be of help in my new assignment," was perhaps an understatement. No wonder the memory of those years still excites me and I can hardly express my gratitude to my staff in the department, the writers I had met whose association I still cherish (many of who are, sadly, no more), and of course Birendrakumar Bhattacharyya, U. R. Anantha Murthy and Indra Nath Choudhuri who let me do whatever I had wanted with the journal. I remember too my predecessors who had first shaped it and my sucessors who tried their best to maintain whatever standards I had attempted to set for the journal.

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Dreaming Indian Literatures Anew

H.S. Shiva Prakash

When did this dream begin to stir in me? Not when I used to leaf through in my formative years in Karnataka the pages of a certain Delhi journal called *Indian Literature*. Not even when I read the Kannada essay on the subject by the now forgotten genius of modernist criticism, the late M G Krishnamurthy. Not even when I was reminded of the existence of a certain Sahitya Akdemi in far-off Delhi, which would perform the ritual of giving awards every year to an important Kannada writer.

In my formative years as a practicing Kannada poet and an average student of English at Bangalore university, I was keenly aware of my location and that of my contemporaries in Kannada situation or on the world literature situation. But I always found Indian literature an elusive notion. Of course I could respond with enthusiasm to works of Bengali in translation. Also, to a larger extent, to Tamil, which I could read and understand somewhat. And, then, of course, the great Sanskrit tradition, which was always there lurking somewhere at the back of my mind. But Indian literature? It was a very hazy notion for me.

Yes, it was a very hazy notion for me till the late 80's, when, thanks to the recommendation and blessings of my poetry guru, the late Gopala Krishna Adiga, I started getting invitations to attend a series of Kavi Bharatis, Seminars, Translation Workshops and soon envisaged and executed with great finesse by a poet-administator Ashok Vajpeyee at Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal. Like the modernist generation, Vajpeyee was not taken in by the official notions of anything Indian. For him, Indianness of Indian literatures was not something already concluded. It was something to be explored through tireless investigations. The path he pursued to realize his dream was one of debates, interactions, translations, transactions between writers from far-flung regions of our many-tongued subcontinent.

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Most of us who came together in these situations were so suspicious of institutionalized forms of Indian culture. This is where little known writers like me were able to interact with the likes of Ramakant Rath, Satchidanandan and Arun Kolatkar, who were the most active and engaged writers of those times.

Debates, interactions, translations, transactions: these were the apertures through which I could glimpse some details of the variegated landscapes of the exciting phenomenon of present-day Indian writings in our diverse languages and styles of expression, united not by the oft-repeated and already clichéd Nehruvian formula, unity in diversity, but also by recurrent patterns of conflicts, confrontations and confluences, the bewildering diversities notwithstanding. That is when these glimpses began to snowball into the bigger dream of Indian literature. Infected with the passion of people like Satchidanandan and Vajpeyee, I plunged headlong into it. It was not just an institutionally favoured project for us. It was a personal commitment. A lot of my energy and time in those years went into the personal agenda of orchestrating the vastly variegated landscape of contemporary Indian experiences being forged into a body of writings.

It is with this dream and passion that I shifted to Delhi in 1997, consequent upon my selection to the post of Editor, *Indian Literature* at Sahitya Akademi. The road had already been prepared for me by my predecessor Satchidanandan, who had now become Secretary of that institution. He had lifted the journal out of the morasses of a government journal by bringing into the mainstream many marginalized voices: Dalits, tribals, women, minor languages. He had already achieved most of what I wanted to do myself. I now wanted to extend his preoccupations. Plus, to bring into the journal whatever was kept out owing to lack of information or acquaintance with ground realities. After burying myself for several months in the colossal piles of unpublished material already submitted, I discovered, to my surprise, that, barring a few, most of it was substandard. None of the leading writers had sent in their writings. That is the reason why Satchi had resorted to conceiving every issue in a focused way. This meant a lot of labour and correspondence. In those days the IL section had few facilities. No email access for the editor, no STD phone connection, not enough staff. One had to depend on the tardy postal communication to identify and organize the translations of stuff worthy of publication. In view of the not so exciting remuneration set apart for translators, it was very difficult to get good translators to work for us. I still remember gratefully how a young scholar from Jamia, Rumi Naqvi, worked very hard with me to bring out a very good issue on Gujarati writings. Or, Prof. Chamanlal who put together some exciting

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Punjabi Dalit writings. Not everyday could one come across the likes of them. Most often initial enthusiasm would peter out into near indifference. At other times, the output of committed labour would be awefully unpublishable.

While I was pursuing my dream project amidst all these disadvantages, I should also recount at least a few good things. First of all, the unconditional cooperation I received from the then President, Anantha Murthy and the Secretary Satchidanandan. "Don't let anyone interfere. Not even me" were Anantha Murthy's encouraging words. That continued to be his stand even when I published a piece highly critical of his writings! Thanks to their positive support and the industry of my new colleague A J Thomas, I was able to bring out widely appreciated issues focusing on aspects of Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Maithili, Bodo and Manipuri literatures. I was able to get remarkable material from medieval and folk sources from different regions. I still remember the extract I published from an oral text *Gorakhnath Puran* which my friend and poet Kanji Patel collected and transcribed from a great spokesman of Gorakhnath Panth, an illiterate snake-charmer from Lunawada, Viramnath. The text appeared in printing for the first time.

I found it poignant that some of the leading writers from different Indian writing from different languages who passed away during my tenure were published for the first time or after a very long time in the journal. For instance, Nagarjun and Dharmaveer Bharati—a commentary on the unavoidable selective nature of literary institutions, however open they sometimes try to be. It was also clear that a lot of lesser writers were over-published because of various factors like their superhuman persistence and closeness to Mandi House.

The imperfect nature of translations we had to compromise with was a frequent source of embarrassment and shame. That situation still has not changed. Good translators are rarely at home with source languages. The most committed and selfless translators well rooted in sources are not always at home with the target language. To overcome this snag, I resorted to Akademi-sponsored workshops as a means of getting good material for the journal. I still remember how a well-organized three-way translation workshop in Hampi among English-Kannada-Malayalam provided excellent material for two issues. The experiment could have gone on.

To open its window on to other world literatures, I made a humble experiment. I started a new section, 'Kinspeople Far and Near,' to accommodate selections from literatures from abroad. I wanted to use this forum to weld together Afro-Asian-Latin American literary explo-

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rations. I desperately started approaching different embassies to help identify publishable material. Only a few embassies responded—the Swedish Embassy for instance. Little response came from others. One embassy misunderstood the whole idea and sent me a lot of 'literature' on tourism in their country! One of my most ambitious projects floundered. But I still feel that some way has to be found to make the journal a site of literary transactions beyond our borders.

Soon, things began to change. My idea of bringing single-language issues were no longer in appreciation. Indian languages were to be alphabetized and multi-focused issues brought out. For the first time, I felt that I was not free. I could not put myself heart and soul into the job any more. I felt somebody breathing down my spine all the time. This was the reason why my later issues grew less inspired. My dream project had come up against rough waters.

Maybe I was too ambitious. Bharat Bhawan, the womb of my dream baby, too had become a government office. Ashok Vajpeyee had long left the place for Delhi. Imaginative networking of writers from everywhere could not be done by Sahitya Akademi alone even under the best circumstances. My writer-friends from other parts of India were becoming increasingly withdrawn from the dream project they had once shared with me. 'O, the heavy change': the way I had been handling the journal started coming under severe criticism from some influential quarters. Many established writers regretted that I was publishing a lot of what they considered substandard stuff in the name of minor literatures. How can standard language writers dismiss the unfamiliar riches of little-known literary cultures? It was becoming inconvenient to go on. My tenure was also ending. It was a great relief that my tenure ended when it ended.

Yes, I had outlived my time in Sahitya Akademi. The journal now needed to be inspired by new ideas and new dreams. This hope was with me when I left the job I had once loved more than anything else in my life.

All said and done *Indian Literature* is the one and only journal that can do maximum to knit our literatures together. It is the only journal which has the potential to take our writings overseas. It is a link not only between our different language areas but also a link between India and the world—India's literary ambassador. It deserves much greater support and resources.

'What use is a lovely garland of flowers unless someone wears it?' asked the great Kannada poet Raghavanka. What use is such a journal

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unless it has a lot of readership. My efforts to alert the sales section about this need did not lead us anywhere. I see a very bright future for the journal. The space for Indian literatures in our universities is now greater. The English departments all over the country have put representative selections of Indian literatures translated in their syllabi. The contents of the journal can be of great support to South Asian scholars in the West. Further, I have found that there are eager readers hungry for it all over India. Their hunger is not sated because the journal is unavailable. Who can awaken the sales section to these possibilities?

I conclude with a small example which goes to show that the journal's significance goes even beyond knitting literatures. For instance, when we put together a special issue on Garhwali literature, this awakened the people in the region to their literary identity. Institutions began to be set up and conferences held. All over the region deep gratitude was expressed to the journal for helping them forge their literary identity. In the backdrop of their struggle against oppressions of different kinds, they felt empowered, thanks to our humble issue.

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Why Not a Glass House?

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee

Recently, I chanced upon the first editorial of the *Indian Literature* written by Krishna Kripalani in 1957, which, *inter alia*, lays out the plan of the journal like this:

> The pages of this journal will bear witness to the nature and scope of the Akademi's work and since this work is concerned mainly with coordinating literary activities in the various Indian languages and supplying and propagating information regarding them, the aim of the journal is modest and limited. It is not a forum to creative literary expression, for such a journal in India can only be in the Indian languages, and, fortunately there is no dearth of them. It is not—though its name may suggest a resemblance—in any respect like the journals published by some foreign countries in which the current stories and poems of their writers are translated and published serially in English for the benefit of foreign readers. Its contents are informative rather than creative or critical and their interest will therefore be limited. Nevertheless the information supplied is of permanent value and needs to be recorded somewhere.

I was stunned. It dawned on me that the journal has evolved into something that it was exactly not supposed to be! The better part of it carries "current stories and poems" translated into English for the benefit of English readers both Indian and 'foreign'. In fact, *Indian Literature*, as we know it today, has been devoted to excellence in the publication of a most eclectic cross-section of contemporary Indian literature.

It may be recalled that during my tenure as Editor, I tried to devote

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some pages in each issue for reproducing the best that was happening in Sahitya Akademi programme-platforms like poems presented by women poets at a programme in Guwahati, papers presented by scholars in a seminar on the *Mahabharat* in Delhi, end-product of a translation workshop held in Agartala, speech delivered in a Meet-the-Author programme in Delhi and such other items. But I was accommodating these items just from a common sense approach without knowing at all that *Indian Literature* was originally meant to carry exclusively these items only. My reasoning was simple: the Akademi's *Newsletter* gives brief accounts of the programmes and their participants, but some of the finest deliberations taking place on the dais remain confined to only a limited audience present on that day at the appointed time. Hence, I thought that if we publish some chosen items from the Akademi programmes in the journal, it would not only act as a dissemination platform but also function as complimentary to the *Newsletter*. Of course, I never thought of doing so at the cost of the "current poems and stories" which we continued to publish as before, but increased the number of pages of the journal to accommodate this new material. While there can still be a debate on the wisdom of the original concept vis-à-vis the present format of the *Indian Literature*, I would think that a judicious mix of both the programme-based articles and the select specimens of Indian creative output in English and English translations will make the journal most appealing in content. Moreover, the title of the journal being *Indian Literature,* the readers' expectation will be to see some real literature also, rather than only information about, or discourses on, it.

The audience for a scholarly/critical journal is by and large the academic world. A few of these do manage to attract a wider audience of intellectuals. But loosely speaking, our "intellectuals" are also mostly affiliated in some respect or other with the academic institutions that sponsor conferences and research. Hence, if we seek to break into the general readership, at least the relatively more receptive and sensitive section of it, then inclusion of poems and stories, interviews and reviews becomes a must. Hence, the more the need to balance it out.

Literary magazines in India and elsewhere are often called 'little magazines', which is not meant as a pejorative but intended as a contrast with larger, commercially-oriented magazines. In general, such magazines function as a sort of literary alternatives for writers by publishing the work of people who may not yet be established or accepted in the mainstream press. The editors of such magazines are often responsible for all aspects of publication, including raising funds, finding a printer who would deliver on credit basis, laying out the text, editing the text,

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proof-reading and also selling the magazine. This tremendous effort is most commendable. But I remember some little magazine editors often telling me with a glint in their eyes that your *Indian Literature* is the most engaging, challenging and serious-minded of all the literary journals published in India. One would immediately see that the hedge of well-meaning adjectives contained the barbed wire: where is jouissance, the seductive pleasure? The hint was that all reading pleasure lies in their little magazine only and not in the *sarkari* journal. Fortunately or unfortunately, I have seen the world of little magazine rather too well. My counter-question to them could have been: where indeed in the independent "little" literary magazines of today does the pleasure lie? Sitting in judgment, the settling of scores, the advocacy or pillorying the new: each magazine has areas of rhetorical specialism, politics, and such magazines advance or counter the interests of a movement or a group. As a result, the readership of these "little" magazines would often remain limited to the interested coterie only. This is the pity of it.

Perhaps a history of taste could be written comparing the radically different editorial approaches of Keshav Malik, S. Balu Rao, D. S. Rao, K. Satchidanandan, H. S. Shiva Prakash and the present writer. But one thing would run common through all of them: a firm belief in the centrality of the creative imagination and of the critical intelligence. When this belief is absolute, the editor would be willing to turn the journal into something of a glass house, tempting to stone-throwers. This is yet to happen with the *Indian Literature*, maybe because of its limitation as an organ of the Sahitya Akademi which, despite all its autonomy, is still perceived to function under the government. Hence the mindset of both the editor and the reader has remained attuned to certain expected and accepted typical characteristics. Until this mindset is revolutionized, I do not see *Indian Literature* becoming a beacon of Indian literary culture.

❑

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Indian Literature Golden Jubilee Literary Translation Prize Winners

POETRY

Rana Nayar **(First)**
Tapan Kumar Pradhan **(Second)**
Paromita Das **(Third)**

Consolation Prize

B.S. Rajkumar
Kuldip Salil
Anupam Bhattacharjee
K. Damodar Rao
Syed Kabeer Ahmad

SHORT STORY/FICTION

Subrata Banerjee **(First)**
Shoma A. Chatterjee **(Second)**
Abha Sah **(Third)**

Consolation Prize

Somdatta Mandal
Ravi Baswani
Parthasarathi Chakrabarti
Vimala Balakrishnan
Rani Motwani

ORAL LITERATURE

Subrata Basu **(First)**
Nila Shah **(Second)**
Shweta Rao **(Third)**

Consolation Prize

A.K. Srivastava
Joysree Das
Shyamal Chakrabarti
V. Ayothi
Anuja Mohan Pradhan

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First Prize : Rana Nayar

Baba Sheikh Farid

Bani Baba Sheikh Farid

1
The day a young girl is betrothed
The wedding day, too, is announced
And as the saying goes
The Angel of Death comes calling
To anoint the ceremony of 'face-showing'
One day, wrenching the 'poor soul' out
By battering the bones dry
He sends out a message, loud and clear
That soul, his bride, shall abide its share of 'allotted time'
And when the moment of final parting comes
With groom, waiting to take the bride away
Clinging to the shoulders of all, she shall cry her heart out
Now whose help shall she seek, and who would she turn to?
Haven't you heard of a 'bridge'?
As thin as human hair
Suspended between life and death
Journeying through hell, all souls must cross
Fearing their fall, forever,
O Farida! You sure can hear all the cries
As you stand on the shore, so delude no more!

2
O Farida! You are no more than a fakir
Hanging outside the door of your *Sain*
But with little bundles of worldly cares
Pressing down constantly upon your head
Go about as though you are a man of the world
Now if you seek Him, why not cast the bundles off?

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3
Life is a puzzle, none can solve
Life is a mystery, none can follow
Life is a raging fire, none can douse
O *Sain* of mine! Had you not poured your Grace divine
This fire would have charred my limbs beyond recognition.

4
O Farida! You knew it well how few the seeds of sesame were
Then why didn't you pick on each with caution and care?
Had I known that Breath, my Lord, was so impatient to go
I, the bride, would have been less vain than I was.

5
O Farida! Had I known that my 'veil' shall be in tatters soon
I wouldn't have tied the 'knot' so hard and strong
My body has roamed the world all so free
But it has seen none as great as Thee.

69
O Farida! What a colourful pitcher it was, before it cracked and fell
How sturdily the rope ran over the pulley, before it began to shear off
Forgetting Him, those who live in sin, adding to the burden of earth,
How dare they turn to Him, when the Angel comes knocking at the door?

70
O Farida! Tell me, what kind of custom do you follow that you refuse
To go to the mosque, five times a day, and offer the *namaaz* as they say,
And if it's a new custom you're creating, tell me, then, why you don't
Ever pray in the silent corner of your heart, O you prayer-less shitty dog!

71
O Farida! Arise and awake, a fresh dawn is about to break,
Go for your morning ablutions, your ritual bath of *Uzu* and more
Cleanse your body, and be ready to bow before Allah in supplication,
Offer *namaaz* or else be ready to lose your head on the chopper's block.

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72
O Farida! The heads that refuse to pray and bow in supplication,
What kind of fate do you recommend for them in retaliation?
Pushing them into a flaming *chulha,* should we leave them to burn
Under a simmering pot, or wait for the fires of hell to consume them.

73
O Farida! Where are your parents, who brought you into this world
Some time back, they did walk this earth, but is it so, any more?
Leaving you alone, they have departed to another world, and yet,
You don't accept that one day, it could happen to you, just as well.

74
O Farida! *Mana* is a patch of an irregular, undulating land,
With its share of peaks and troughs, its lows and highs
If you run a leveller thro,' smoothing the rough edges,
Then, your land shall not burn, in the raging fires of hell.

Translated from Punjabi by Rana Nayar

Guru Arjun Dev

75
O Farida! The Creator is a whole, and yet an inseparable part
Of his creation; His halo suffuses all the beings of his Creation,
In such a situation, it's very difficult to say what 'evil' is
Sahib's fiery presence is what breathes life into this world.

76
O Farida! If the day they chose to snip your umbilical cord,
Their hand had slipped, leaving a gash on your throat, instead
Then, you wouldn't have lived to see, this spectacle of suffering,
Life would have meant very little, and its clouds of glory, even less?

77
O Farida! Slowly all the limbs you always called your own
Ears and eyes, teeth and legs, are now sliding into decline
Seeing this change, sometimes, the body screams in pain
"Oh, tell me, where have all my trusted friends gone?"

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78
O Farida! To all those who do an evil turn unto you
Return only the good; do nothing less, nothing more
Purge your mind of anger, and your body shall be pure
Otherwise, it's not easy to proclaim, 'O, I love this life so.'

79
O Farida! What a lush garden of grace is this world of yours
Here birds come twittering, flitting from branch to branch,
At dawn-break, when the Angel of Death comes marching in
With the drums beating, loud and clear, the battle for life begins.

80
O Farida! At the dead of night, I trust, musk is handed out free
But all those who sleep thro' the night, fail to get their share,
Groggy eyes, always heavy with the burden of sleeplessness
See nothing, not even the Grace when it descends from above.

81
O Farida! I thought I alone was the sufferer, so little did I know That
all those who visit this world, are condemned to suffer, too,
Clambering up the roof-top, when I screened my eyes to view,
Each house, I saw, caught in flames of desire, burning down slow.

82
O Farida! This colourful garden has beauty, beyond compare
Yet somewhere in the middle, plants of acacia also mushroom,
Those who are blessed, protected by their Sahib's Grace,
Never taste this poison, nor do they ever countenance Hell.

83
O Farida! Only they possess a beautiful body or mind
Or ever see the waves of happiness lapping their shores,
Who thrive on the love of Lord divine; the only One,
Such people are hard to find, where do I look for them?

84
O Water! Don't rush in too fast, overrunning the embankments
If His will is what you must fulfill, then do check your flow
Let Sahib whisper His word unto you, only then you must act
Remember, the course you must run, crosses through His heart.

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85
O Farida! Days are full of agony; your pain knows no end
Your nights are no less thorny, always wounding your toes
Flailing his arms, a boatman screams across to the shore,
"I'm caught in a whirlpool; my boat will soon capsize!"

86
O Farida! Endless is the stretch of the river, it overruns
Its banks, and cuts away the edges of its own sandy walls
Why flail your arms, O boatman! Why cry in despair,
If you couldn't see the whirlpools or waves swishing by.

96
O Farida! Trees standing tall on the river banks, O how long
Shall they last; one day, they must float beneath the water,
And all the earthen pots, the potter had little time to bake
Shall turn into potsherds, as they fall on the ground and break.

97
O Farida! The palaces that hummed with songs of life, once
Are now haunted by wilderness, their inmates in the graves
So crowded are these graves, the dead lie huddled together
It's a warning to you, O Sheikh, start your prayers right away
For who knows, you too, may have to depart before it's too late.

98
O Farida! The shore of death appears more like the bank of a river,
From across this shore, we often hear loud lamentations of pain
Or soul-wrenching cries of Hell; that these are mere warnings
Only a few understand, others who are more cavalier,
Dismiss them as much furore; don't forget, the actions
You do in this world, shall testify for you in Sahib's court.

99
O Farida! On the bank of this river, a stork splashes around
And gambols with a swan, feeling superior and triumphant
Stork is immersed in the sport, when the hawk-eyed eagle
Swoops down, unnerving the stork with its sudden attack
Losing all sense of gamboling, the stork lies half unconscious,
Often God does surprise, by doing what we least expect Him to do.

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100

O Farida! This body is so well-supplied, that it's become oversized
Nourished by air, water and food, it's now a little over two hundred pounds
When man comes into this world, his eyes dance with hopes, fearfully high
Now as the Angel of Death comes knocking, crashing in through the door
Man's brothers shall join hands, too, tying him up into a disposable bundle,
While lifting him aloft their shoulders, would they remember what they need to?
That all the good deeds of this world shall only be rewarded in Sahib's court.

101

O Farida! Blessed are those birds that live in the forests, free
Pecking into pebbles and pieces of straw, they while away their time,
Though heaven-borne, they remain earth-bound, never leave the ground
The secret of their eternal joy is, they are always found in Sahib's company.

102

O Farida! Once again, the season has taken a toss, and a cold shiver
Runs thro' the forest; shedding their leaves, the trees begin to tremble
Searching for peace, I go bounding thro' the corners of the world four
Deep turmoil I find everywhere, but abiding, restful perch, nowhere.

Translated from Punjabi by Rana Nayar ❑

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Tapan Kumar Pradhan

Equation

1
From **Blood to Tears**

Kalahandi asks :
Have you seen my little child
with running nose, my only child—
for forty rupees I had sold him off
ten years ago at the time of drought—
how tall and strong he would be now:
Have you seen him *Babu*
in the Raipur Market?

Kalahandi asks:
Have you seen my woman
with the copper bracelet—
Five years ago she went
to the Sukinda Mines alone
to feed her stomach, never returned
Have you seen her Babu
on the Cuttack Road?

Tears are dear, blood is cheap:
How will Kalahandi ever understand
the tricky game of tears and blood?
With his blood and tears are made
Cuttack's sky-scrapers
Raipur's smart streets
For a sack of rice, and forty rupees
He has already drained his entire blood.

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So cheap!
For so cheap who will return to him
His only woman, his only child—
the child with the running nose?

2
From Tears to Blood

Kalahandi today weeps more
like an obstinate child—boo-hoo-wo-wow
The dicey game of tears and blood
Kalahandi has now well-understood
Blood is dear, tears are cheap—
And today in Kalahandi's own courtyard
business roars on flesh and blood.

Kalahandi with her own knife
chops off flesh from her own thighs
and cooks and serves it hot and fresh
to businessmen and city guests.

Kalahandi's blood today stinks of money
from Cuttack to Delhi, in the veins of Raipur
there flows today costly Kalahandi blood:
She sells blood today in return for tear-drops:
Rich man's sweet drops, gold drops, silver drops
rain down today on Kalahandi's laps.

3
Tears in Blood

Today in Kalahandi's blue blood streams
all kinds of deadly viruses abound
spreading from village to village
city to city, town to town
sowing seeds of mass destruction—
From Cuttack to Delhi, Andhra to Assam
spreading like AIDS, sparing no one
leaving death trails along high-roads

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making holy city their shrines in fear.
Soon Death will spread all over the land
Then alone will the living dead understand
whether blood is costly or tears are costly—
Recovering principal with ten-fold interest:
Kalahandi will then take her
revenge against her Betrayer.

Translated from Oriya by the Poet

Kalahandi*

In the shifting shadows of lantern light
Her hollow contours become yet more pronounced
Against the pitch darkness of the impatient man
As he advances she struggles with the suffocating stench
Of empty sacks stained with kerosene smoke

The smell of hooch, of sweat, of flesh, the Man's
Drunken half-smile, look of vague desire, the dark
Hollow of her dry hung elongated breasts, the dark
Gaping cleavages of paddy fields throw a mocking sneer.

Erratic fingers, nails digging into the skin—
Haggard-looking hawks swooping down in haphazard trajectories.

Twisting of bodies, arms clasping, unclasping
Emaciated naked children fight over a loaf
Of dark bread snatched from a tired dog:

silhouettes of puppets in a drollery

A woman wails by the body
Of husband crushed under a sack of relief rice
his breath, her breath; hot, mingling together:
Dry leaves rustle in the mid-afternoon air.

Kala-handi (literally "black pot") is a drought-affected district in Orissa

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She cambers up, indifferent, like a crab in spasms.
As the hairy-chested man lunges for a decisive thrust:
Look of tiredness in the eyes,
ready to bite, but unable to move the underjaws.

Her body, breathing, lies exhausted—
A gleam of compromised content in her eyes
Having added two rupees to the forty she earned last

week by selling off her daughter.

Translated from Oriya by the Poet

The Hour of Coming

Death does not come when you call him
However much you call, He never comes:
He comes only at his appointed hour—
Playing hide and seek, just biding his time
Comes Death one day
all of a sudden!

When you are lying alone in your bed of rags
With flies on your face, blood in the nostrils
Knees full of pus, boils under buttocks
With nobody near you just to say 'Ah Dear!' to you
With no strength left even to vomit things out
And with eyes filled with tears mixed with pain
You cry out loud—Death! Death! O Death!
Can't bear it any more Oh take me away Death!!
But never comes Death!

When you are sitting alone in the middle of the night
Under the village banyan tree wrapped in a blanket
Looking at your younger brother's funeral pyre:
in the burning embers you see your wife's dead face—
Remember your playmates, school-friends, dead face
You cry out loud pressing your aching heart to your chest
Friends gone, kins gone, daughter gone to her in-laws:

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Why do you now, O Lord, still keep me in this world!
You wish, if only
could just now
come Death!!
Never comes Death!

When you are relaxing supine in your bed
Pressing the radio close, listening to cricket:
India versus Pakistan—Ah final match,
Just ten runs to win, and another wicket:
Your daughter comes near, and breaks the news
Of Son-in-law's promotion—ah what a good news,
Playing in her lap your four-month old grandson
with his soft pink little fingers fondles your beard:
"Oh dear one! My diamond! My golden one, my little one!
Umhh... let my remaining years be all yours O lovely one....!"
You softly kiss your grandson's forehead—
Four runs to win :

Then comes Death!

Translated from Oriya by the Poet ❑

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Parbati Prasad Baruva

If Life be Lost

If life be lost
But death eludes.
If your home be lost
and you find yourself homeless.
What will your fate be
O unfortunate one!

In shallow waters have you sunk
Your treasure-laden vessel
The vast ocean of life lies ahead
Canst thou hope to safely sail
o unfortunate one!

You floundered in mid-waters
Failed to reach the shore
Grave blunder robbed you of life
yet death still eludes.
If you pierce your heart with thorns
what will your fate be
O unfortunate one!

Translated from Assamese by Paromita Das

Life Awakens

Life awakens!
A new life awakens!
Awakens at the touch of a dreamer.

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From which distant heavenly land
comes this new air,
awakening the dry branches?

The *nahar*[1] sports new leaves
The birds sing sweet new songs.

The dead current of life overflows
Life awakens, bursting into song.
And the young heart trembles in delight!

Translated from Assamese by Paromita Das

❑

1. A tall flowering tree

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E. Nilakanta Singh

Do You Remember, Manorama?

Do You Remember an Inn, Miranda?

The hut of leaves that we both built atop the Koubru hill
Do you remember, Manorama?
The shapeless hut of leaves the ineffable wind of Koubru
The aimless life of man and my heart that you alone understand.
The blowing of a storm the coming of a cyclone
The heartless darkening of lowering legions of cloud
The restless gesture of lightning
The terrible thunderclap.
(You held me tightly at that moment
And how both of us did laugh at that!)
Do you remember, Manorama?
Do you remember?
The coming of a spring breeze that made leaves tremble
That made my heart tremble
That made your heart, too, tremble.
But nothing to be seen except the hut of leaves
Your hut of leaves
You and I
I and you,
Do you remember, Manorama?
Do you remember?
Do you remember
Your pointing a finger and throwing out a single leaf
Towards the lights of the noisy city during the night under a dark-sky
The eagerness to be engulfed in the city's hasty rhythm.
Your beginning to sing the eternal song of Koubru
Blending it with the gesture of flowers accompanied by soft winds
And finding a haven in my heart.

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Do you remember, Manorama?
Do you remember?
The flowers you planted on Koubru the fruit-bearing trees you nourished
The flower of your life the fruit of my heart.
The king of seasons replete with the glory of flowers, fruits and fanned by spring breezes

The melody of the lonely hill top of Koubru
The melody of your life the melody of my life
The ultimate destiny of melody the spring of my heart's peace
Our hut of leaves.
Do you remember, Manorama?
Do you remember?
By the hut of leaves on Koubru
How did many a moonshine smile, spring flower
How did many a fruit leave the branches, spring pass!
How did many a darkening cloud frighten our hearts
How did the darkness of many a night darken our lives.
Do you remember, Manorama?
Do you remember?
But as you know well
Our hut of leaves is no more, has been to ashes done one day on Koubru

Burnt in a wildfire in a frightful of conflagration on the hilltop.
The burning of my heart, the burning of your heart,
The endless flames
The flame of your life
The flame of my life.
How long did we weep holding one another tightly by the light of that flame

You, too, cried I also cried
Koubru also cried.
The hut of leaves that we both built atop the Koubru hill
Do you remember, Manorama?
Do you remember?

Translated from Manipuri by B.S. Rajkumar ❑

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Hafeez Jallandhari

I Am Youthful Still, Still I Am Young

1
Pleasant is the breeze and for flowers a bloom time.
The nightingale is at its song, the spring at its prime
Where do you go, O Saqi dear
Come hither, come here,
What for do you wait, why hesitate,
Pick up the cup, fill it up,
Fill it up and give it hither
Look at the garden, feel the weather;
Like a crowd of drinking men
Marching on towards the tavern,
The thickening clouds in the sky
The thick dark clouds catch the eye;
You're mistaken, you are wrong, I am not weak, I am strong
I am youthful still, still I'm young

2
No question of prayers yet
No desire yet for redemption
But Sheikhji, you are a strange person
Thinking all the time of pious deeds,
Thinking of where our sin leads,
But have you ever given a thought
Can youth and beauty stand apart?
If the beauties are on view
And their gestures murderous too,
If the fragrant breezes blow
Love is indeed bound to grow.
Lovely faces, simply murderous

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Here, there and everywhere
Excite your passion through and through
What can poor mortals do?
But to cut the matter short
Even if right you are
I am youthful still, still I'm young.

3

This walk along the mountain path,
This walk along the riverside
These cackles of the blooming faces
The nightingales showering graces
This chance meeting with someone
No tension left, sorrow, none
Somebody unlucky, somebody sad
Somebody here exceedingly glad—
These are but the tales of love.
Here we have a youthful fare
Grace here, boastings there;
On the earth and the sky
Lovely sights all around
All around, this lovely fare—
How can I leave it there!
I cannot believe, O just yet
That my death is approaching near
Never, never, indeed, never
For, I am youthful still, still I'm young.

4

No tension about meeting and separation,
No tension about rise and fall,
Neither of present, nor of past
Nor of promises made last;
Hope gone, despair gone
Gone all senses, thoughts all—
Everything, except the glass—
Everything around fall does....
Let there be no want of drink
Let the cup full overflow
Let the mehfil be in place
On and on, let it go.

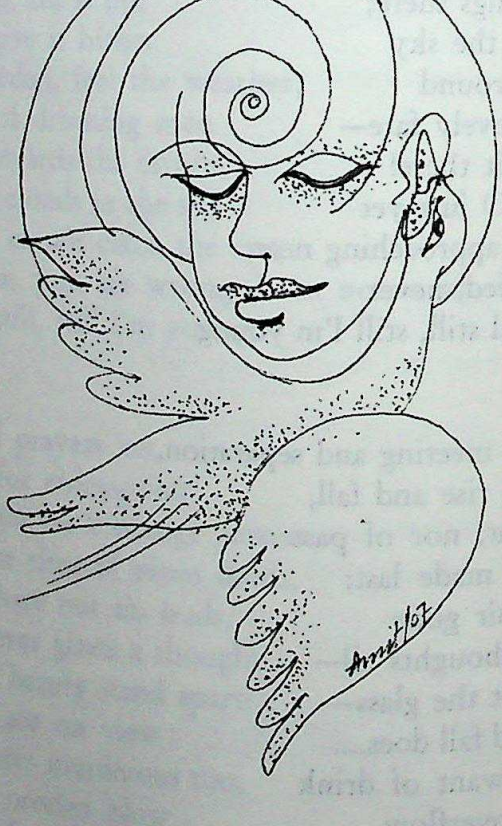
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O thou singer, play the tune
That gives joy, takes away pain—
No pain, and joy entire,
The tune that sets my being afire
Let everybody hum this tune
Stay not your hand, O Saqi dear
Give me more, pour me here.
I am youthful still, still I'm young.

Translated from Urdu by Kuldip Salil

❑



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Jibanananda Das

The Cat

A cat—
I chance upon it every now and then,
Throughout the day;
Under a shady tree,
Roaming in the sun,
Stretching on a pile of senescent vestiges of youthful green
Basking, sometimes,
In the glory over a few pieces of fishbone.
Then
Into the skeleton of pallid earth—
In deep self-introspection
As focussed as a bee.
Again
It sharpens its claws on the delicate bark of a tree
That turns a riot of crimson in the spring.
The feline follows the daystar
All day long—
Playing hide and seek.

Fall-afternoon—
Its white paws explores the suppleness of
Phoebus Apollo* playfully:
Then
Those little, soft paws reach out
To collect darkness

* Phoebus Apollo is the sun god in ancient Greeko-Roman myths

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And sprinkles it
Over this earth.

Translated from Bengali by Anupam Bhattacharjee

Joy Goswami

A Dialogue Between the God and the Lover

'What if she burns you down to death?'
I shall die for her with unwavering faith.

'If she throws you up to the clouds?'
I shall come down as rain-drops as ever proud.

'If she crushes you to dust?'
I shall fly to every place light and fast.

'Fly? Alright. If your wings are clipped?'
I would clutch her branch while I slipped.

'If she pushes you off the branch and you fall free?'
Who else to turn to? The only one to cling on to is she.

You put this court's equanimity to test
Awarded you are with a life of unrest.

Translated from Bengali by Anupam Bhattacharjee

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N. Gopi

Lonely Multitude

The river, born alone, nurtures
a multi-branched family
as it traverses along.

The flowing feet across polished stones
convert into voices.
The identity of loneliness is broken
and vibrations spread across the sky.

Sky means endless sphere.
But a bird reigns supreme there.
For the insensate sky
the flutter of wings is the life-line.

The tide that retraced awhile
touches the shore with experience-surf

The west that consumed sun-blood
with its cupped hands
is transformed into dawn
to the agony-tune of birds.

The heart-nut imprisoned in side-bones
yearns for community.

The essence of the matter is
the eye-candle will not melt away
despite the many tears rolled by.

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Today's multitude implies
the shadows spread beneath
the lonely lamp-post!

Translated from Telugu by K. Damodar Rao

The Victor

If the globe turns backwards
will the past reappear?

As one flies in the sky
space is reduced

Time is the child,
constantly born,
from the womb of mobility

Time is proud, but it knows
nothing except rolling
and revolving around itself

Evolution is not time's achievement
Man accomplished it holding his head aloft

Even as time opened its eyes
man had grown up sky-high
and made many rounds around it

Time will not keep quiet
Even as it uproots man
he is born again

As time has no death, it is not re-born.
As it does not face death
it feels terribly devastated!

Translated from Telugu by K. Damodar Rao

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Culvert

To tell the truth
I wish to jump out of the bus
and fall over that culvert
seeking comfort.

Catching hold of evening twilight-ribbons
hanging from the sky
I wish to rock in the cradle of emotions.

I wish to paste my body
with the cow-dung sprinkled
by twirling tails of home-bound cows.

Over the springs of skinny bones
over the heads carrying loads
I wish to press myself as *cuttakuduru**

To tell the truth
if the bus comes to a halt here
over the potstone-steps of the tea-stall
I will let you hear that
haunting poverty-ridden childhood-melody.

For the numerous children
emerging from the silken sun-light of infancy
I extend welcome with countless arms.

I wish to cry for those of my childhood friends
who are many times brighter
but could not cross our village-bounds
becoming bonded in labour

As I get stiffled
amidst sham postures of professional superiority
amidst purple fears of positions of dignity
amidst smells of scentless, staid maturity
amidst routine-rites of life-pretensions

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* a cloth-pad placed on the head to support and balance a basket or a pot

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I wish to pierce this bus open
to blossom like a thousand-petalled flower.
Don't stop me,
I will embrace the culvert-mother!
As I return to my village
after a long gap
so many memories
as if music traverses through my backbone!

Even as I get down with fond memories
strangely,
my childhood-village is not there!

Streets polish their political knives
Cock-fights cause feathers fly in air.
Unable to bear, I take to the bus.

Culverts slide down, drop by drop,
from eye-corners.

The city is not even my beloved
In village, mother's lap is not found.

Like a lonely, dry stump
separated from the two
I am.....

Translated from Telugu by K. Damodar Rao

Morning-Garden

So big a garden
totters at once

Folding its wings
the same bird sings

Ambrosia swells
from silence-crevice

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So much wind is stilled
in a moment

That unknown tree
signals a storm of aromas

The sun, entangled in branches,
jumps out suddenly

The fallen *tangedu** flowers
sparkle like embers of fire.

Following a new life-breath
yesterday's ashes are strewn around

In the brightness of creation
today's buds blossom

The weapons lost in sleep
trace their owner, one by one

Mounting the bow
I take aim with arrows of rays.

Translated from Telugu by K. Damodar Rao

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* Yellow flowering species of *cassia sophora* family

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Allama Iqbal

The Desert Bloom

Alone and lonely, through and through,
This dome, enameled, cold and blue
Spread out as far as eyes can see,
This desert really frightens me.

You and I in our own way,
Are lonely travellers gone astray,
O desert bloom! enlighten me,
What is the goal of your journey?

Alas! This hillside bears no more,
A Moses to converse with or,
Aren't you the flame of Mount Sinai?
Aren't I the flame of Mount Sinai?

Why did you blossom, a lonely shoot?
What did I follow in hot pursuit?
Was it the call of our instinct?
The pride and joy of being distinct?

May God extend His hands above
The divers of the sea called Love,
For every drop of this deep sea
Has dimensions of Eternity.

The whirlpools in the sea that raves
Are its eyes weeping on the graves
Of wavelets born in the ocean's core
Destined never to reach the shore.

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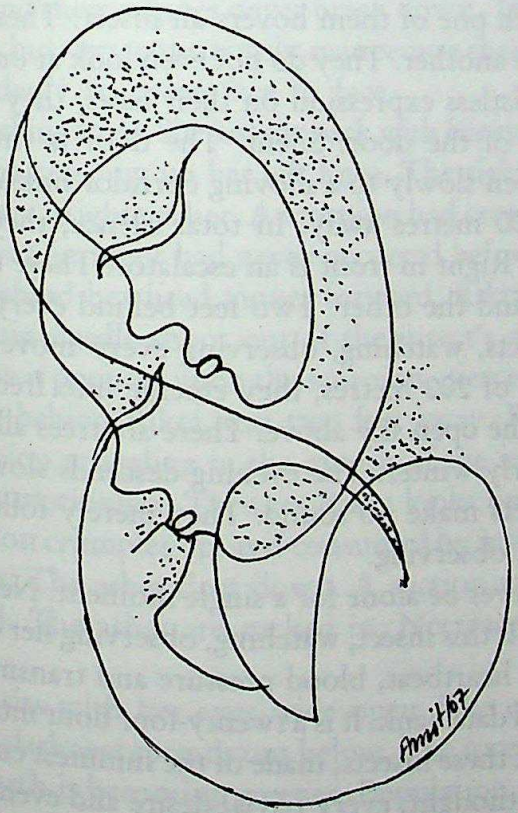
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The vibrant energy of Man,
Is a thing unique for what else can,
Keep the universe moving incessantly
While the sun and stars watch silently.

O desert breeze! would you kindly
Bestow your attributes on me,
Of a peaceful, caring heart afire,
With passion that will never tire.

Translated from Urdu by Syed Kabeer Ahmed

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First Prize : Subrata Banerjee

The Insect

Shirshendu Mukhopadhayay

Rikta stands up slowly. The lethargy of a great fatigue in every movement. It is nearly five in the evening. The day's work is done. At different corners of the hall a few other work-weary people also stand up. For them too it is the end of the day's duties. They too would now go home. Behind each one of them hovers an insect. These people do not converse with one another. They do not even look at one another. With a morose, tired, listless expression on their faces, they go and stand in a queue in front of the door. Silent. The door is fitted with a time lock. It swings open slowly to a moving corridor linked to a stationary platform some 200 metres away. In total silence, they step down on to it, one by one. Right in front is an escalator. These tired people step on to it, one behind the other. Two feet behind every person, hovers one of these insects, watching, observing every movement.

At a height of 200 metres, they emerge into freedom. The earth under their feet, the open sky above. There are trees all around. A chill in the air. It is early winter. The evening descends slowly like a flimsy curtain. The insects make no sound. They merely follow each person, just watching and observing.

Rikta can never be alone for a single moment. Never feel carefree. All the time there is this insect, watching, observing her every step, every movement, every heartbeat, blood pressure and transmitting the information to a central data bank. It is a twenty-four hour monitoring system. She had heard that these insects, made of the minutest components, were sensitive to every thought, every trivial desire and even the dreams that possessed one's sleeping hours. They were sensitive to sorrow and happiness, to ecstasy. They hovered behind one's head all the time, following every step. It was impossible to escape from their relentless presence, even for a moment.

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Outside, a narrow street runs past the trees through the forest. The road is empty. There are no people about, no car, no lights. Grass and weeds are taking over. Rikta enters the huge garage on the left. Actually there is no need to. It has a set of numbered buttons. Rikta and her colleagues stand one behind the other and take their turn to press their respective code numbers and step aside. Through another door one car after another comes out automatically. Rikta's car is like any other. Small and light. There is no need to drive it. At the press of a coded button the small car soars into the sky and flies at great speed towards its designated destination. There is no sound. Not even a quiver. As Rikta's car speeds through the dark void, she continues to be in the grip of a heavy lassitude. She looks behind her at the insect. It continues to hover at a distance of two feet. Steady, watching, observing.

Many cars, like Rikta's, fly in different directions. These cars consume no fuel. They have only a minuscule nuclear-powered engine and a remarkable buoyancy stabilizer. They are equipped with air-conditioning, music system, telephone, TV and luxuriously comfortable seats. These cars are accident-free and their engines never break down. They never collide with one another, but very courteously manoeuvre their way past when they happen suddenly to come face to face.

Rikta has nothing to do. She just sits back with her eyes shut. Suddenly she feels something creeping up her left knee. The sight that meets her, as she opens her eyes, frightens her. A scorpion had crept up her trousers to her knee. Such an incident had never occurred before. Suddenly, the insect hovering behind her head moves forward. Rikta sees something like a gleaming thin needle shoot out of the insect's mouth. Within a twinkling of an eye it pounces upon the scorpion, pierces it with a needle and takes it away behind Rikta, just two feet away. Rikta looks back and sees the scorpion wriggling in the mouth of the insect. Slowly the scorpion becomes motionless. Then, as Rikta looks on, the motionless body of the scorpion crumples up, as if consumed by instant heat. Slowly it turns into ashes. The ashes float down. A suction mechanism at her feet gets activated. The ashes are sucked in. No trace of the incident is left behind.

Rikta now sits with her eyes wide open. The car flies over the forest. Deepening darkness spreads out below. The forest cover has been expanding. The earth is becoming greener. Population growth is totally under control. There is no shortage of food or wealth on earth. There are no limits to the freedom of humanity.

Is Rikta really free? She looks behind at the insect. It hovers steadily two feet behind her head. A protector? No! For the last ten years Rikta

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has failed to understand whether any relationship has been established between her and the insect. Suddenly, a thousand metres below, a building comes into view amidst the trees. On its roof a green light picks out the words: 'Sector Three'. This is where Rikta lives. It is an eighty-storyed apartment house furnished with all the necessary facilities. The terrace provides landing and parking space for the cars. There are a few thousand flats in the building. On the ground floor are located a shopping plaza, a hospital, post office, swimming pool, etc.

Here everyone lives alone. No permanent relationship is established among the residents. No marriages ever take place. Men and women can, however, mix freely, just as they wish; Children are born, if desired, but after that the mother has nothing to do with the child. It goes first to a creche and later to a children's home. The child does not bear the name of either of its parents.

Rikta's car lands on the terrace. A weary Rikta steps out. Two people alight from the next car—a man and a woman. They do not exchange a single word. In total silence they walk towards the staircase. They would probably spend the night together. Neither would probably bother to find out anything about the other, not even the name. In the morning each would go his or her own way. They would probably never meet again.

The design of the house is very ordinary, standardized like every other building these days. It is built on four sides of a rectangular courtyard, covering a large area. One can look down at it from the terrace. In the midst of this vast empty space, a number of lifts move up and down at lightning speed. There is a narrow catwalk to reach the lift. It is like a glass tube. One can see all around. Rikta feels a little frightened as she looks down from a height of eighty storeys. Whenever she has the time she prefers to use the moving staircase. Today she is very tired. She walks on the catwalk towards the lift. Made of glass, it is transparent. Rikta feels a bit afraid.

The lift is programmed with the information that Rikta lives on the twenty-fifth floor. The ever-alert insect is fully coded. The lift recognizes the code and rushes down at such great speed as if it has lost control and is about to crash. It stops. Rikta walks on the catwalk and steps out on the moving corridor. On reaching her flat, she just moves from the corridor to the platform in front of the entrance There is no lock on the door. Here too there is a code. As Rikta stands in front of the door, it opens automatically.

A small sitting room. A small bedroom. A tiny space like the kitchen of a doll's house. A toilet. The walls are of glass. There is no provision

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for curtains. At the press of a button the transparent glass becomes translucent. As Rikta enters, a robot comes forward and helps her undress and put on a skimpy garment, suitable for relaxing at home. The robot puts on the water to boil on a stove without any flame. Fire is no longer in use these days. One cooks with heat generated by the pulsation of ether.

Rikta drinks her tea. The robot goes into the bathroom to heat the water in the bathtub to the required temperature for Rikta's bath. It starts an audiocassette of music. The robot then gives Rikta a massage. Its hands are fitted with soft pads. The massage is very soothing. There are different kinds of massage. The robot has to be suitably programmed.

While the massage is in progress, there is a signal. Ding-dong! Suddenly a rectangular space on the wall lights up. The face of a woman appears. Rikta does not recognize her. The woman looks at Rikta and, in a tone of rebuke, asks, "Who am I?"

Rikta replies, "How do I know. Ask the ID."

ID stands for the Identity Department. Living all alone all the time, one occasionally forgets one's identity. It happens quite frequently these days. The ID then helps one recall one's identity.

In an angry voice the woman says, "It's making a mistake."

"What does it say?"

"It says I'm Jaba."

"Then you must be Jaba."

"No I'm not Jaba. I'm Purna. I belong to sector four. ID says it's sector three."

"What it says is correct. Accept it."

"How can I accept it? I'm Purna."

"No. You're Jaba."

"Never!...You're very beautiful."

Rikta frowns. "Beautiful! Beautiful doesn't matter these days."

"Why not? You're beautiful."

"You too are beautiful. These days every one is beautiful. Those who aren't beautiful undergo cosmetic surgery to become beautiful."

"No. You're beautiful in a different way...Will you come to my room? I'm on the seventy-first floor. Flat B4 On catwalk No. 4."

"I'm very tired."

"But I'm not Jaba! It's such a nuisance."

"What does it matter? It doesn't matter who you are."

"Who are you?'

"I'm Rikta."

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"Can I come to your place for a little while?"

"No. I'm tired. I'll have a bath now. Then I'll go to sleep."

"Steep? How strange! I can't sleep."

"It's quite easy to fall asleep. Just lie down on the dream-bed and you'll fall asleep in no time."

"I can't!"

"Then you'd better go to the hospital."

"I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Mandira had gone to the hospital. They put her to sleep for 500 years. They claimed that the complications in her nervous system were so serious that it would take 500 years to set it right. What if they treat me the same way?"

"Let them. It'll do you good."

"I don't want to sleep for such a long time. It's like dying! After 500 years will I remember who I am?"

"Even now you don't remember who you are!"

"I'm Purna."

"ID doesn't say so."

"It's making a mistake."

Rikta heaves a sigh of despair and orders the robot to shut off the videophone.

At times Rikta too faces the same problem. For days on end nobody calls her by her name. Nobody speaks to her. Nobody even looks at her face. At such times she wonders, "Who am I?"

Rikta takes her bath. The robot had already prepared her dinner and set the table. The meal consists of a little soup and some boiled vegetables. After food Rikta lies down on her dream-bed. Before she falls asleep, she looks at the insect hovering two feet above her head.

The dream-bed is the product of an amazing technology. On lying down on the bed a mild rocking movement starts. Together with soft music and sound-waves it induces a trance and relaxes one's limbs. Then how was it that the other woman could not sleep? In her sleep Rikta has a long dream. There is not a soul on this earth. She alone is alive. She is walking slowly along the bank of a river. The insect, however, continues to hover behind her head, watching, observing. Suddenly Rikta turns around and confronts the insect, "Why are you following me even now? On whose behalf? For what purpose? I'm alone now. Alone! Totally alone!"

The insect remains unperturbed.

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Rikta then pleads with it, "Please leave me alone now. Let me be truly alone. Just once!"

The insect does not move.

Rikta wakes up at two in the morning. She sits up. The robot immediately comes forward.

Rikta says, "Listen! Trace the girl named Jaba."

A picture appears on the wall. Jaba is seen sitting on a chair. Silent.

"Jaba! Hi Jaba!"

"I'm Purna!"

"Can I come to your room for a while?"

"Come along. I've a strange feeling. Am I two persons? Jaba and Purna?"

Rikta does not take long to reach Jaba's room. She lives in a flat exactly like Rikta's. Everything is the same. The robot opens the door, because it cannot be opened with Rikta's code.

"I'm Rikta."

"You're very beautiful."

"Can't you sleep?"

"No. I can't sleep tonight. I've an identity problem today. Do you know, I've killed the insect?"

Rikta is stunned. "Killed it? How?"

"I have a ray gun. I killed the insect with it."

"Oh dear! But why?"

"Because it doesn't leave me alone for a moment."

"Good heavens! Do you realize what the punishment for it is?"

"I know. They'll alter me, will they? Let them. I don't like to live this life any longer."

"They'll give you a half-mechanical and half-human form and send you to a physical labour zone. There you'll have to work all the time."

"I know. Even that is better than this."

Rikta suddenly lapses into silence. The insect is recording every word and movement of hers. This is not good! She suddenly asks, "Where's your weapon? There it's lying on the table."

Without consciously thinking about what she is going to do, Rikta suddenly picks up the weapon. She turns round to face the insect and

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suddenly squeezes the trigger. A sudden flash! Blue lightning! The next moment the insect seems to explode. Rikta stares in amazement at the empty space. The insect is no longer there. It had been there for ten long years. Her constant companion. Now it is no longer there.

Rikta looks at Jaba and suddenly smiles. Jaba smiles back.

Then the two of them burst into hearty laughter. After many, many years. They go on laughing with complete abandon, for the first time ever!

Translated from Bengali by Subrata Banerjee

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The Search

Shirshendu Mukhopadhayay

Come on in inspector, welcome.

Honestly, to be very frank, I have been waiting a lifetime for you. I knew you would come and turn my carefully organized family upside down with your search. The loud sound of your boots and of those of your subordinates will shock my little son out of deep sleep; my wife and sister will hide themselves in a corner and shiver in fear; my old parents will send fervent prayers up there; my brother, for fear of being taken in God-Knows-Why, will escape through the back door. I have actually visualized all this. I had known that the inspector would barge in one day with his team. I was anxious and afraid, very. Your visit has relieved me of this constant state of panic. Go ahead. Disturb my family setting; turn it upside down as much as you wish. Afterwards, I will be at peace. Happy too. You are tall. Take care to bend a bit as you step in, inspector. None of us are tall here so the door has not been built to reach high, you see. You do know, don't you, that we are very ordinary people, built small too, so we do not need doors that stand tall.

Just a minute, inspector, let me take your picture with my Agfa Click Camera!

Did I hear you say no? It's not written in the rules, did you say? Okay, that's fine then. Here, take a look at the camera. No explosive, gun or pistol is hidden inside. It is just a camera, plain and simple. I am not sure though, if it is loaded with a film roll. Did I say the camera was mine? That is not quite true, you see. It belonged to a cousin. She was married to a rich man. But she could not get along. The husband had another woman on the side. My cousin led a sad life from the day she was married. She would cry all the time. Once, when she came to attend an invitation here, she forgot her camera behind. She went

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back home, took Tik-20 and killed herself. No one bothered to take the camera back. Nor did we bother to give it back. It has been with us since. It is "made in India," you can check it out if you want. This at least, is not a smuggled import!

Aah! How well built you are inspector! Your imposing presence shows that you are a government employee. I was hoping it would be like this, precisely like this. This is what an inspector should look like! Your height is matched by the broadness of your shoulders, and what a striking pair of arms you have - big and strong! How sharp your eyes are, really!

Yes, inspector, you can call this our drawing room. You must know that I am not the owner of this house? Yes sir. We are tenants. It is Rs. 130.00 a month, plus the power bills.

No, no inspector, please don't misunderstand me. When I said that the entrance was not built high, I was not for a minute suggesting that this house was built by me, or by us! Not that at all! By "us" I wanted to point out at all of us here. Ordinary people like us are built small these days. This includes my landlord, myself, the rest of the members of this house, everyone. We do not need a tall entrance to step in or step out of the house. Rarely do we have to welcome guests as tall as you are. That's right, this is our drawing room. Let me add that we never got the chance of making this room 'exclusive' for guests and visitors because we have only two rooms. You see that makeshift divan there? That is where my parents sleep. My sister sleeps on the floor. No, there is no place for my brother. He goes to sleep at a friend's place at night. My wife and I sleep in the inner room with our little boy. Even so, this room is our drawing room. Visitors seat themselves on those less-than-ordinary chairs you see there. They chat for a while. Is it a crime to call this the 'drawing room' inspector?

What are you looking for inside the flower vase inspector? The flowers? Ha Ha! No, I don't buy flowers everyday. How can I afford them, tell me? Don't be fooled by the freshness and fragrance of the *rajanigandha* sticks and imagine that I can afford them everyday. I don't have a single paisa to waste, believe me! I'll let you into a secret, inspector. Yesterday was our wedding anniversary. No, no, we never celebrate anniversaries, weddings or any other. We did not invite anyone, nor did we waste money in romantic nonsense like gifts. Call it wish fulfillment, a nostalgic mistake, or an emotional impulse. All I did was buy a dozen sticks of *rajanigandha* flowers. Oh great inspector! Forgive me my weak heart. No, I know all this does not suit me at all. What can flowers do? Nothing. These flowers are reflections of our foolishness; that is all they are.

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Did you find anything inside the flower vase? Nothing? I knew you wouldn't. You have thrown away the flowers. You upturned the vase, poured the water on the floor and I can now see you lifting your arm holding the vase high up to bang it on the floor. Oh great man, such body language can suit you alone!! Wonderful! Dash it to the floor, do it. Let me see!

That box over there? No inspector, there are no bombs or gunpowder hidden inside its pitch darkness. It holds my mother's prayer beads. Please inspector, don't lift the cover off the bed! All you will find underneath are a torn sheet and greasy pillows.

Oh so you've lifted it! Now I'll have to turn around to face the wall. What a shame! Inspector, will you also lift that sheet to take a look at the mattress below? O God! That will be the limits of shame too! How and where will I hide this 40-year-old mattress? The cotton stuffing is lumped up in places, while at others, the cotton keeps peeping out of holes; like the moon, it is full of deep gorges and scars.

No great man. I am not crying. But then, I must say you are cruel. Why did you have to see it all?

That box there you mean? Ha Ha! That is no short rifle or long pistol. The joke is that my father once played on the violin. Have you never seen a violin box before? No, none of us here play on the violin. It is lying there just like that. Take a close look, do. Foreign made? Yes sir! That's correct. It was bought fifty years ago during the British rule. Such items of luxury came from across the seas then. Yes sir, that razor too. My father shaves with it everyday. It is not used for any other purpose, believe me. No, these are not brought through bootlegging. Nor are they smuggled items.

Black money did you say?

Oh you great man, oh you massive person, you must be referring to that Rs.37.60 paise kept inside the drawer of that table, aren't you? No. Almighty! It is not black money. In fact, it is too, too white. It is so white that you can call it anaemic money, suffering from acute shortage of blood. Oh Great Spirit, still six days to go for the month to end. That money there has a short life indeed. Can't you see that they are white with the fear of Judgement Day looming ahead?

That small earthen pot? Yes, my wife saves small coins in it. Break it inspector please do. My wife does not allow me to touch her piggy bank. But you will not stand for such cleverness, will you? Oh, Pillar of Strength, break it and see how much my wife has saved up inside.

No no, don't take the trouble of counting in one paisa, two paisa coins. I guess it will not amount to more than two or three rupees.

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But these two or three rupees carry the taint of black money. This is almost stolen money. You can confiscate it if you like.

Here, take these keys to the steel cupboard. Ha ha! Are you asking me if it is mine? No, my lord. This is the one pricey thing I got for my wedding. My poor father-in-law refused to give the steel cupboard to begin with. The marriage was called off, almost, on this one ground. He agreed in the end and the marriage went off smoothly.

This is the room my wife and I live in. What are you seeing, revered sir? Please, please, do not look inside that bamboo cylinder. Small people like me have some secrets too. Not dangerous my lord, but embarrassing. I beg of you, please don't look inside.

Shame, inspector, utter shame! I keep contraceptives in that bamboo cylinder. Revered sir is it not shameful to admit that my wife and I indulge in....Everyone knows, but it is still shameful! Why did you look inside, inspector? Why did you? I cannot look up for shame. Forgive us this secrecy, Great Spirit. You are equal to God, we are mere humans. I know you will forgive us this small trespass. It is a poor man's crime.

Give me a minute inspector. No, I am not conspiring with my wife, not at all. I am telling her to make some tea for you. It's not necessary? Well, your wish is our command.

Did you find gold in the cupboard inspector? Yes, your guess is right. The ornaments are real gold. Five *tolas* in all. A chain, a pair of earrings, a ring, buttons—that's five *tolas* all told. Maa has some gold besides this, kept in her box. They belong to her. Nearly ten *tolas* of gold are there in our house, not more. Yes, inspector, I plead guilty. I know that 70 per cent of Indian homes do not have even a milligram of gold. I belong to that rare species that forms the remaining 30 per cent that has ten *tolas* – yes, Great Spirit – ten *tolas* of gold. Are you going to confiscate it? No? Thanks, thanks a ton.

Are you looking at my wife inspector? Take a look, a good one; it's been a long time since anyone has taken a good look at her. She wasn't great to look at anyway; now, she is a ghost of her former self. No, she is not old you know? Yet she is like this. Very ordinary, thin and sickly. Out there on the streets, no one appears to notice her. You are the only man other than her husband who has bothered to pay attention after a long time. She is really afraid; look, she is trembling in fear. She is quite quarrelsome otherwise; fights with me all the time. But with you, she can't act clever, really. You are great, all-powerful, and terrible. We have spread our existence out like a carpet under your feet, so forceful is your presence.

Careful inspector. My one-year-old son is awake. There he comes,

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crawling towards you at great speed. Look at his audacity. There he stands up, holding on to your pillar-like thighs. Inspector, look, he is reaching out to the revolver at your waist! Forgive him inspector, please. Such audacity is not becoming. He is just an innocent, foolish little child. Forgive him.

No respected sir that bundle of letters is no secret document. But of course, it is private. My wife had gone to her parents' home for her delivery. That is when she wrote me those letters. Want to read them? Want to take a look? Ha Ha! Go ahead take a look. No need to feel shy in your presence, is there? No dada, no. Those letters are filled with emotions, faith, but do they ring true? Take this sentence for instance . "I pray I am blessed with you for a husband through several births" -is this line true? Crazy! I cannot think why she must pray for a marginal, failure of a man like me for a husband through several births! There is no logic in this, my revered one! These are words used for their own sake, a figment of her imagination. Said because it had to be said, written because it is customary. But I take them out yet, to read them from time to time. It's a nice feeling to make-believe that perhaps, this is all true.

Yes, this young girl is my sister. No, she is not beautiful. How can she be beautiful tell me? Beauty is born in a beautiful family. We are ordinary, plain. So, she is not beautiful, true. But she is young. Take a good look at her if you wish. Let her feel blessed for once.

Did you find anything of worth, revered one? Your eyebrows are drawn close in a frown; your face is grave and thoughtful. But what did you get, great man? Look at the fragmented remains of the earthen piggy bank, along with the small coins. There lie the flowers, the vase, and the water. The bed is turned upside down; the boxes and the cupboards are lying open, laying bare our carefully concealed torn and tattered lives, with the dirt and the squalor. Our slightness stands out in sharp relief. Yet, tell me, what did you find at the end of the day? What will you pick to confiscate?

What are you searching for in those cloudy eyes of my old parents? What do you hope to find? What do you seek in the eyes of my sister and my wife? They are frightened, let me tell you. What lies within the eyes of my boy, respectful? What lies in mine? Tell me inspector. Tell me!

You let out a deep sigh and mumble 'found.'. My heart empties out like a deep well as I hear it. I pray of you not to keep us in suspense any more.

You've found something you say? Oh God! Everyone has these,

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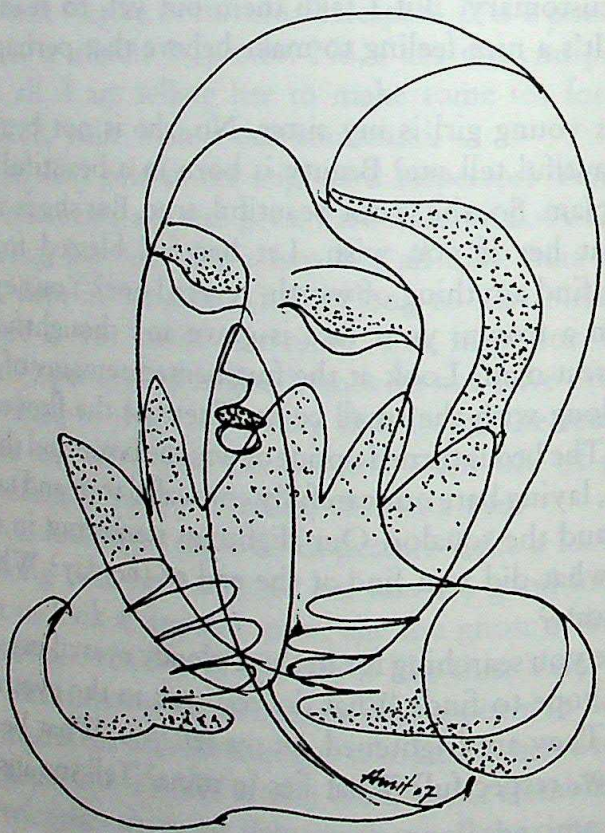
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respected sir. You found dreams hidden in our eyes, with ambition, love and trust thrown in. Respected sir, we have nothing else. These are needless, useless things. They are not fit for confiscation.

Inspector, inspector, Oh respected sir, you all-powerful being, do not take away from us the little we have; take away everything else, confiscate them. Throw us out on the streets clothed in beggar's tatters! But please, I beg of you, do not confiscate these little things we hide in our eyes. Inspector, inspector....

Translated from Bengali by Shoma A. Chatterjee

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Ghar: The House

Sheela Indra

To find and buy a house in a city like Bombay is more difficult than chewing iron filings. Our sons were young adults already. By God's grace they had found jobs in this wonderful city of Bombay. I foresaw a bleak future for myself. As soon as they got married these sons would lovingly say, "Mummy dear! Papa has retired, so why don't the two of you shift from here, and go settle in that huge *kothi* in that beloved city of your beloved Uttar Pradesh?" Being accustomed to living in our small three-room flat in Bombay, my sons naturally found their *babaji's* house a huge *kothi*. At first they will talk the language of love and courtesy. If we do not listen, then they will acquaint us with the realities of life. Of course, there is no doubt that we will not be moved by these realities. Then, these sons will behave like their own father's father and begin to growl.

It was beyond the scope of my imagination and daring to visualise the worst-case scenario. Nor did our sons seem the kind who would stoop too low. How much further could things deteriorate? I sat down to discuss these concerns with *shreemaanji,* my husband dear, seeking sage advice. But he has learnt only to earn, not to invest or acquire. Quite angrily he said, "How can they drive us away from our own home? If they wish to get married, let them first get their own houses."

So that was that. The spade had been declared a spade, and there would be no two ways about it. I was unable to sleep nights, or work peacefully in the day. I had got accustomed to the equitable climate of Bombay. How would I tolerate the singeing summers and the freezing winters of Uttar Pradesh? And in that clime, I would be the one who would have to get out of the house for the marketing and all. So, pray, *bhai,* why would I leave my beloved Bombay?

To get to heaven who would have to die? Me, of course! Instead

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of the usual 'how do you dos?' to all and sundry, it became 'do you know of any decent but cheap accommodation?'

Jin khoja tin payya, he who seeks, gets. I too found out about some decent houses. But the builder was unwilling to talk to me. He sang a monotone, "Don't talk to *ladies-log,* to women-folk. Send the *seth,* the man of the house." How was I to explain to him that *seth* lived in his own flat! He has no need of a flat now. As for his sons, the flat is in their father's name, and not even their *baap* can oust them from there. I am the one who is in need of a house. I cajoled. "Give me the details. I will get *seth* later."

The flats looked all right according to the budget and needs of our children. Looked all right, that is, not in actuality. The flats were still in the plans, on paper. A colony of seven buildings was expected to go up. *Haan,* one or two skeletons were standing. Our building, the one in which our sons were to have their flats, was taking shape in my imagination. And I paid the first instalment. After receiving the cheque, he did not ask for *seth.* As I was leaving, I asked, "When will the house be ready?"

The builder gave me a smile. "Madam, this is a building, not a *jalebi,* that you put on the wok and the *jalebi* is done." I was stunned to hear this reply, looking for a deeper meaning, when an enthusiastic gentleman sitting there, remarked, *"Arrey* madam! Why do worry? Even the occupation certificate has been received, just you wait and see, the house will be ready in six to eight months."

This sent a shock to my innards. What if I am left standing, looking on, waiting and watching while these two walk away with all our money? And at home the *baap-betas,* father and sons, together will pull my hair out. I was unaware of the implication of this 'occupation certificate.' After many secret conclaves with many people over the next ten to fifteen days, I found out that before a building is constructed, permission has to be obtained from the municipality. That they must have taken, I hope. When the building is completed, the municipality gives it a once over, a check, and when everything is found in order they certify it. In other words, they are telling the proud new owners, "Oh you buyers of this house, the house is ready, come, enter and make it your home. Enjoy and endure." I am agitated. How has a house, of which not even a brick has been laid, got an occupation certificate? A problem of this magnitude and I cannot even mention it to *shreemanjii,* there would be hell to pay. So it was, that I reached the builder's office once again. I plied him with full faith, and my confidence and trust in him assured him, perhaps. A lot of conversation and then I asked him for a copy

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of the occupation certificate. He handed it over to me with due respect. The certificate had been issued by the gram panchayat. I expressed my curiosity.

He covered me with the warmth of his benign smile. *"Behenji,* sister, this area was earlier known as a village. We bought this land from a few farmers. At that time this area was under the gram panchayat. Then we heard that the panchayat raj was being abolished, and the municipality was going to take over, we quickly went to the panchayat and got this certificate." And with an attitudinal shrug, 'everything goes', he turned to his other business.

The proverbial snake and mongoose situation. If I object to this and anger the builder and he returns my money, then my dream-houses will collapse. Who knows this may be the way of all builders! I try to reassure myself. But if I trust him and say nothing, then ... then if the municipality ... I couldn't take that trend of thought any further... I have read and heard, so often, that our government suddenly wakes up and with hammer and cudgel in hand demolishes homes and shops, converting habitations into cremation grounds. That which rose from the dust is levelled to the dust again. It issues the occupation certificate, and then it declares the construction illegal and runs the bulldozer.

What is this government anyway? It has defied my understanding, always. Would that someone would explain to me. The government seems to be as all-powerful as God. It creates, it destroys. Only the government knows the workings of its own magic. It is perhaps even above God in hierarchy.

So after several sleepless nights, I took the two or four papers concerning the house that I had and reached the place where once there had been the gram panchayat office. I found out that the office no longer existed, but there were three people present to wind up the relics of the work. A *chotey sahib,* junior officer, a clerk, and a *chaprasi.* With great difficulty, I was permitted to enter *chotey sahib's* room when I tried to talk to them. It was their take that they now had nothing to do with the public; whatever I needed to ask, I should ask the municipality. All the files have been sent to the municipal office. I got angry, "If you all don't talk to me, I will register a complaint about how you issue false occupation certificates to buildings that are not even constructed. There is not a single column erected yet on the land, and you have already given a certificate clearing the building. Is such a thing done, ever?" *Chotey sahib* cast a meaningful glance at the clerk. There was some significant eye-to-eye communication from the clerk, and *chotey sahib* invited me in and courteously offered me a chair. He listened to what I had to say.

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Then he said to me, "Madam, the officer who was in charge at that time has gone away. He must have been the one who issued the permissions. Actually, this is illegal. Now, this entire area has come under the jurisdiction of the municipality. You go to their office. Whatever has to be done they will do. Whatever advice has to be given, they will give."

Poor me! Back to square one! The municipal office is quite far from our place. As if in another town. A full one-and-a-half-hour's travel and I reached the grand four storey building which housed the municipal office. The office was situated in the district of which that village was part. It was far away from main Bombay, and was reachable only by bus and train. It was ten-thirty in the morning. I was told that the senior-most officer had not yet come. It would be at least another hour or half. I waited with great devotion. Eleven-thirty and *bade sahib* arrived. I got up on seeing him he cast a glance in my direction and swiftly moved into his office. I prepared to go in, but was stopped, *"Sahib* will now do his *puja,"* the *chaprasi* told me.

Puzzled and amazed, I sat down. At about twelve I was permitted to go into the office. The formal namasteys over, I was asked to take a seat. I displayed my problem to him in the form of several papers. The plan of the building, the receipt of the money paid in advance, the occupation certificate issued by the panchayat and others all in photocopies.

He asked me what my problem was. I explained everything to him in a way that he would understand. Then I asked, "Sir! On the allocated land, there are just a few skeleton structures, can a possession certificate be given for that? Possession certificates have already been issued for buildings that have not been completed."

Sahib called in his clerk, and spoke to him in marathi. I understood a bit, and most not. The conclusion was this, "Madam! These buildings are all illegal!"

I felt consciousness leaving me. Good God! Now what? What kind of soup was I in? Sahib had already turned to the other work that he had to attend to. In a severely disappointed tone I spoke to him. "Sir, I have a request."

"What?"

"Sir, please demolish these structures?"

"What? What is this you are saying? I should demolish those buildings?" Sahib was obviously disturbed.

I stayed adamant. "Sir, why don't you understand? Just run the bulldozer over these structures. You will be praised for your work. The press will carry your photograph. And who knows, maybe

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a promotion ..." I noticed that the clerk was standing there, smiling, "See, Sir! You yourself are saying that these buildings are illegal, and poor people like us are going to put all our life-savings into them. Then we can at least ask for our advance to be returned. And even if he doesn't return that, then at least the rest of our money will be saved. Not only mine, but that of all the other buyers as well. As it is, these are illegal constructions, and you will definitely demolish them later on. And the ones to be hurt will be people like us, who earn their money by honest hard toil." I began to feel that my plea was quickly taking the shape of a moral discourse. I shut up.

Sahib had been giving a very patient hearing to my case. Then he looked again at my papers and made a note in his diary. Smiling, he said, "Madam, shall I tell you something? You go ahead and buy those houses with a free mind. These houses will not be demolished. And please leave these papers with me."

"Really, they will not be demolished?" My disbelief was evident in my voice. But it was not possible to indulge in childish arguments or get a promise out of him. So with a heartfelt thank you and a warm namastey, I left. I was thinking, "This is your cross sweetheart, may the good Lord protect."

Several years have passed since this incident. The boys are married and settled in their homes. They are quite pleased as well. But my life is still on that cross. These days I am again on the look-out for some decent, legal houses for them before they find out the illegal truth or get into some difficulty. And I will pull this house on to some poor needful person. But how can I pass on this house? And that to some needy person? No I can never do that!

I keep praying that the government should never come to know. It sleeps, let it sleep on; therein lies the good of all.

Translated from Hindi by Abha Sah

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Lalu

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay

His pet name was Lalu. He had a formal, official name but I don't remember it. Perhaps you know that the word "lal" in Hindi means 'favourite.' I don't know who had given him such a name but such a consistency between a person and his name is hardly found. He was everyone's favourite.

After leaving school we got admitted to college. Lalu said that he would do business. He borrowed ten rupees from his mother and started business as a contractor. "Lalu, your capital resource is only ten rupees," we told him. He smiled and replied, "How much more do I need? This is enough."

Everyone loved Lalu. So he always got the contracts easily. After that, on my way to college, I would often see Lalu standing with an umbrella over his head supervising a few labourers undertaking road repair. Making fun of us he would say, "Go, run -your percentage will be cancelled now."

Much earlier, when we were younger and studied in a Bangla school, he was everyone's mechanic. He always had several instruments in his schoolbag - the handle of a mortar and pestle, a nail cutter, a broken knife, a carpenter's drill to make holes with, and a horseshoe. I do not know from where he had accumulated these things, but there was no work that he could not do with them. He would do many things for his schoolmates. This included repairing broken umbrellas, fixing the wooden frames of slates, stitching clothes torn while playing games, etc. Moreover, Lalu never refused to do any work. And he would do it efficiently. Once on the *Chaat* festival day, he bought a few paise worth of coloured paper and Indian cork and made some toys with them. Then he went and sold them near the bank of the river for two and a half rupees and with that money fed us a lot of chickpeas.

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As the years went by, we all grew up. There was no one in the gymnastics club to compete with Lalu. Both his physical strength and courage were endless. He would turn up whenever anyone called him or whenever anyone was in trouble perhaps because he did not know what fear meant. He had only one serious vice and that was whenever he found an opportunity of frightening or terrifying people, he could not control himself. This he did to all men irrespective of their age. How he could invent such plans for frightening people within seconds was beyond our imagination. Let me narrate one or two such incidents.

Kalipuja was being celebrated in our locality at Manohar Chatterjee's house. At midnight, the auspicious time for animal sacrifice was waning away but the man to do it was still absent. People who went to fetch him found him unconscious with stomachache. When they came back and broke the news, everyone was upset and worried at the same time. How could they arrange for another person to do the sacrifice in the middle of the night? The puja for the Goddess would be ruined. Someone said, "Lalu can slaughter lambs. He has done this job many times before."

People ran for Lalu. He woke up from his sleep and just said "No." "How can you say no? It would be dangerous if there were impediments in the puja." "Let it be interrupted," replied Lalu "I did all that in childhood but I will not do it now."

Those who had come to call him started scratching their heads. There was hardly ten to fifteen minutes left for the auspicious moment to be over and after that no one would escape the wrath of the Goddess. Lalu's father came and ordered him to go.

"Since they have come to you in desperation, it would not be good to refuse. You better go," he said. Lalu could not disobey his father's command.

Mr. Chatterjee was relieved after seeing Lalu. Time was running short. The sacrificial lamb was hurriedly decorated with *sindoor* and a red garland of hibiscus and led to the stocks. The loud shouts in unison of "Ma, Ma" by all the members present there subdued the last cries of the helpless animal. The large falchion in Lalu's hand was raised and came down instantly. The spurt of blood from the beheaded beast painted the dark ground red. For some time Lalu stood with his eyes closed. Gradually the loud noise of drums and cymbals subsided. Again *sindoor* was smeared on the second lamb's forehead, a red garland hung on his neck, again the stocks and the shouting of "Ma, Ma" in unison. Lalu lifted the blood-smeared falchion once again and brought it down instantly. The severed body of the animal shook for some time before it became still and the animal's blood stained the ground even further.

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The drummer kept on beating the drum in full swing, the people stood crowded upon the front verandah, Manohar Chatterjee sat on a carpet seat and praying with his eyes closed, when suddenly Lalu delivered a menacing shout. In an instant all the noise subsided and everyone was astonished at his behaviour. Opening his eyes as widely as possible, his eyeballs roving, Lalu shouted, "Where are more lambs?" Someone from the house replied in a scared tone, "There are no more lambs. We just offer only two per year."

Swinging the blood-stained falchion twice above his head, Lalu roared in a rough voice, "No more lambs? That will not do. I want to kill. Either give me lambs or I will get hold of anyone and slaughter him—Ma! Ma! *Jai Kali!*" Uttering these words he leaped over the stocks with the falchion still spinning above his head.

What followed next defies description. Everyone started rushing towards the front door before Lalu could catch them. The rush to escape resulted in a stampede. Some rolled down, some crawled between the legs of other people, some people whose necks were caught under the arms of others were nearly suffocating to death, some even tried to climb above other people's shoulders and fell flat on the floor. All these lasted for a moment and soon it was empty everywhere. "Where is Manohar Chatterjee? Where is the *purohit?*" roared Lalu.

The *purohit* was a lean man and right at the beginning he had hid himself behind the idol. The *gurudev* who was sitting on the floor and reciting from the holy scriptures quickly got up and hid behind a huge pillar near the puja pavilion. But it was very difficult for Manohar to run away with his huge body. Lalu came up, caught his arm with his left hand and said, "Come and rest your neck in the stocks." The firm grip of his arm and the sight the falchion scared Chatterjee to death. In a soft and entreating manner he begged, "Lalu! Dear! Look patiently - I am not a lamb, but a human being. I am your uncle, so to say, dear. Your father is like my younger brother."

"I don't know about that. I want to slaughter. So come and I will sacrifice you. It is the order of the Goddess."

"No, dear, it cannot be the order of the Goddess." Chatterjee sobbed loudly. "It cannot be so—she is the Mother of the world."

"Mother of the world? Do you have that much knowledge? Will you sacrifice lambs again? Will you send for me again to do the slaughter? Answer me."

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Chatterjee replied in tears, "No, never again. I am promising before the Goddess that from this day onwards there shall not be any more sacrifices in my house."

"Right?"

"Yes, right. Not again. Now dear, let off my hand. I want to go to the toilet."

Letting off his hand Lalu said, "OK, go, I am letting you off for today. But where did the *purohit* escape? Where is the *gurudev?*"

With a menacing shout he rushed towards the Goddess. Suddenly cries in two different voices came out from behind the pillar. The combined cries of a thin and a hoarse voice resulted in such a strange and funny situation that Lalu could not control himself anymore. He burst out laughing 'Ha, ha, ha! and dropping the falchion upon the floor, scampered away from that house.

It was only then that everyone regained their senses and realized that Lalu was just playing tricks with them. Killing human beings was just a part of his deliberate plan to fool everyone. Everyone who had run away assembled back within five minutes. The puja was still incomplete and things had already been delayed for quite some time. Amidst all that hustle and bustle Mr. Chatterjee kept on promising to himself, "If I cannot make that boy's father give him at least fifty blows with a sandal by tomorrow morning, I shall no longer be called Manohar Chatterjee."

But Lalu did not have to undergo that ordeal. He escaped somewhere early in the morning so quietly that no one could find him for about seven or eight days. About a week later he quietly sneaked into Manohar Chatterjee's house one evening and begged forgiveness by touching his feet. So for that instance at least, he was saved from his father's wrath. But whatever it might be, because he had sworn before the Goddess, the practice of sacrificing lambs during *Kalipuja* was forever stopped in the Chatteriee household.

Translated from Bengali by Somdatta Mandal ❑

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Pagalee

Ravi Kiran Shastri

The first time I saw Pagalee, something about her struck me as exceptional. This ten-year-old seemed much wiser than her appearance. She had dark and deep eyes that stared with grim determination. Yet, those eyes were pleasant. She had lovely sharp features that were destined to develop into making a beautiful face. Her thick, curly hair fell on her shoulders like a thousand little snakes. Her upright posture and dignified walk made her look much older than she was. The only blemish, if I may use the word with due respect to her beauty, was that she was dark. That was perhaps one reason for her bright eyes to be so distinctly noticed.

It was about six o'clock in the morning at the Vijayawada station. I had just woken up having gone to sleep waiting for my train to Mumbai. As I looked around, I saw her having her bath at one of the taps, just a couple of yards away from me. Little droplets of water glistened on her dark shoulders like diamonds. She shook her hair almost in slow motion and momentarily, the spray of water created a small rainbow round her, like a halo. She looked at me and smiled politely. She moved away from the tap as if to give me way. Still in a trance of my own, I could not stop myself from smiling back at her as I walked up to the tap.

I had to wait for another two hours for my train and that was when I learnt all about Pagalee. She was the adopted child of platform no. 6 & 7. She had come to Vijayawada as a six-month-old, along with her mother, from some small village near Gudur. As a child she was told that she was being taken to her father, some train driver who had lured her mother with city glamour, and then duped her. Scorned by the villagers and spurned by her family, the pregnant woman set out in search of the driver. By the time Pagalee was born on the platform

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of Gudur station, her mother had almost gone mad with sorrow. Life for her was just a wander from one station to another, her baby clutched closely to her heart, babbling all the time, living on the mercy of God. And God did come to her rescue in the form of Basavanna, the 'cloakroom' in-charge at Vijayawada's platform number six. This old man took pity on the six-month-old child, and since then she had been there as an unofficial employee of the Railways, doing odd jobs for everyone. Her mentally retarded mother had died five years ago when she walked into an oncoming train one night. The name Pagalee was given to her because she was deaf and dumb, she could only babble, like her mother, and never could speak. As I talked with Basavanna, while collecting my baggage, I did notice that Pagalee was watching me all the time from the corner of her eyes.

Our next encounter was to happen not before another four years. My train to Vishakhapattanam was to halt at Vijayawada for twenty minutes. Curiously, I walked to the cloakroom to find out about her. I was surprised to see Basavanna still there. He too remembered me. Pagalee was very much around, he informed me, adding rather authoritatively that as long as he was there she would remain. Soon she came by. I was stunned at the sight of her. At fourteen she had already grown to be a ravishing beauty. Her curly hair had thickened immensely. Her face had become full and round. Her cheeks shone with perspiration like freshly washed plums. Her dark, taut and smooth skin made her look like a statuette of some goddess. Her radiant lips pleasantly curled up, as if in a constant smile. Yet, her eyes had the same look - dark, deep and a grim, determined look. She also remembered me and with a broad smile greeted me by joining her hands. She was now wearing the official blue sari and white blouse - uniform of the Railways. Casually I remarked that she looked beautiful in that dress. She just smiled. I learnt from Basavanna that she now stayed with his family. After the marriage of both his daughters, he and his wife felt so lonely that they decided to keep her with them as part of the family. She had over the years learnt to read and write. I was rather glad to hear that. Though no school was ready to admit her because of her advanced age; she was studying at home from his daughters' books. She had to get a matriculation certificate at the least to get a decent job with the Railways, he reckoned. He was happy that Pagalee herself was more interested in higher education. He laughed as he described her grand plans about getting a job with the Railways and retain their Railway quarters. His only worry was that she was too young for marriage and he had only two more years for his retirement from the job, after which he would have to move back to his village. Strangely,

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I felt like contributing towards the education of Pagalee. I knew Basavanna would not have accepted any charity. As I turned to her I realised that she was looking intently at this book I happened to have in my hand - "A Guide to Southern India". The book was in English, yet, as a token of my appreciation of her efforts, I offered her the book as a gift. Initially she was reluctant but when Basavanna assented, she accepted the book and thanked me.

A couple of years later I had forgotten all about her when suddenly one fine afternoon I received a letter from Basavanna. Where on earth did he get my address from, I wondered? As I began to read I got my answer within the first sentence of the letter. The book I had given to Pagalee happened to have my visiting card as a bookmark. It was really a very shocking and sad letter. Pagalee had disappeared! Basavanna wrote that she had passed her matriculation with good marks and was preparing for the departmental exams of the Railways, after which she could have got a job as a booking clerk. He had even got her a certificate of being a handicapped, which would have helped her in getting the job. It had been about a month since she disappeared. He had reported the matter to the local police as well as the Railway police, but there had been no trace of her. He was worried because in a month's time he was to retire.

I could not but resist going to Vijayawada. A week later when I met Basavanna, he told me, what he had not told the police, that, it appeared to him that Pagalee had planned very well for her disappearance. Though the police were taking it up as a kidnapping or disappearing case, he was sure that Pagalee had other ideas. He explained that all the documents belonging to her were missing, her certificates, her ID card, even her photographs, copies of which were submitted to various departments. The police had, on his persuasion, acquired her photos from the welfare department from where he had got her certificate of being a handicapped person. Yet, they were not very keen on finding her, he lamented. After all, she was just an orphan whose background they all knew. "Anna, why be so charitable towards these types? The bitch, she might have eloped with someone." One of the cops had said which had made him very angry, for he had brought her up with all his affection, as his own child. He was glad to see me because just a week ago he had met someone who had a very shocking story to narrate.

This man Prakash was the co-driver for the Chennai-Delhi Tamilnadu Express and was on this route for the first time. "The train had just left Warangal early in the morning when this deaf and dumb girl in tattered clothes walked into the engine. Initially the driver was very angry and

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threatened to get her arrested but the girl started crying at his feet, pleading him to take her to Delhi. There was lust in the eyes of the driver suddenly as he saw her youthful breasts peeping out of her torn blouse. The girl also knew it, perhaps, and within half an hour he had agreed to take her to Jhansi, after she willingly agreed to spend the night with him. Our duty was to finish at Balharshah, a few hours later, but the driver was going on to Jhansi for some personal work. That was the last I heard of him and the girt. The driver has been missing since he arrived at Jhansi nearly a month ago. And so is the girl." Prakash recognised the picture of Pagalee as the one who was on the train that night. That was a new twist to the tale!

Another two years went by. Basavanna retired and went back to his village forgetting all about Pagalee. She was out of my life as well, or so I believed, till the other day I thought I spotted her at a Church in Cochin! I had come here to shoot a documentary film and passing by this Church I saw this nun who had a striking resemblance to Pagalee. Unnoticed by her, I watched her once, twice, thrice and became convinced that she was Pagalee. She was always covered from head to toe in her nun's dress yet her eyes were the same! How could I ever forget those eyes! Her only feature that had captivated me and had me mesmerised for all these years! I decided to confront her.

I was in for the shock of my life as I sat in front of her in her little room in the abbey and heard her speak! Yes she spoke! Very clearly and very gently but she spoke like all of us did!

"Don't be surprised. I could speak even as a child. I heard and understood everything that was spoken around me. And don't be surprised again, to learn that even my mother spoke very well but she had found that the handicap of being a deaf and dumb can be advantageous." she told me as I blankly looked at a portrait of Basavanna on her table.

She had perhaps caught my eye. "Yes, I have tremendous love and regard for him. Every day before I pray in front of God I say my prayers here, at his feet, and beg for forgiveness. Because I have sinned. I have sinned in abandoning him, who has been more to me than my father. I have sinned in letting down his wife who treated me like one of her own children. I have sinned in being a cheat all those lovely years that I spent under his affectionate wings. Out there in the Church I am doing my penance as Sister Theresa but here in this room, in front of this 'God', I only pray that may God give him a long life enough long for me to some day fall at his feet and beg him forgiveness."

I was amazed that she spoke with so much emotion yet, while my own eyes were wet, there was not even a sign of any tears in her

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eyes. As if she read my mind, she continued, "No, I won't cry over what I did. I shall never shed tears, ever, as I never did even during those difficult days at the station. That is one thing my mother told me never to do. It would perhaps be impossible for anyone to understand how it feels, when, at the age of five your mother tells you not to ever cry again and not to miss your mother...and then in front of your very own eyes she commits suicide by walking into a speeding train!" She took a long pause. "Before she died she told me everything about her and my father. Nobody knows that she had told me my father's name. Nobody knows that at the age of five I had promised my mother, just before her death, that some day I would find my father and make him pay for what he did to my mother!"

I waited innocently for her to continue. "I had found my father when I was twelve. By the time you met me and gave me the book I had learnt all about the movements of drivers from one duty to the other. All the time I had kept track of my father. I was biding my time so that I could really become independent. And finally my day did come. I trapped my father in the very trap he got my mother into. You can never imagine what hatred it generates when you learn that at the age of fifty your own father can be so disgustingly lecherous!" She paused yet again to control her anger. "When he led me to an isolated shed in Jhansi, before he could even touch me, I had cut his throat with this chopper I had carried with me from Vijayawada. He fell in a heap without making any sound. I was overtaken by rage and ruthlessness, like the Goddess Durga. I kept on hitting him with the chopper, with each hit recalling each day my mother cursed him, till he was cut into nearly a hundred pieces. Then I put all that mess into a gunny-bag and tied it up under one of the bogies of a Delhi bound train." To my amazement, she smiled, "I had laughed at what I was doing it because I remembered my mother cursing him—*may the crows and the wild dogs eat him!*"

A few months later I received a letter from Basavanna that Sister Theresa had come to meet him and that he had forgiven her. He was happy that she had found a permanent job, in the service of the Almighty!

Pagalee to me was finally dead. Sister Theresa, as I last heard, was still in the same church in Cochin.

Translated from Hindi by Ravi Baswani ❑

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Worldly Affliction

Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay

Excuse me. Can you tell me what time it is?

Seven minutes past six.

My watch says five minutes to six. Again it must have gone bad.

It's a machine after all. Dysfunction is quite possible. Even my watch is not credible.

No mister. It is my watch that has a problem. Always gets slow. It's a mechanical watch, anyway, that too some cheap brand. Quite old too. Must be almost a decade now. Got it oiled some six months back. The repair man had suggested getting a quartz watch. But the sentimental attachment we have to old things—still wearing the same one.

That's true. And it's good to be attached to the old.

Besides, it's my wedding watch, gifted by my poor father-in-law. Discarding this might hurt my wife.

That it might. You must have married very young.

Yes, how did you know?

You just said it's a decade old watch. This means you got married ten years back. But you don't appear to be more than thirty.

Oh yes. That was something. Had to get married at twenty one! Actually, I got involved with a girl at a very young age. She was a Brahmin. I was not. My father is very conservative. The fear of me marrying a Brahmin girl made him tie my knot with a sixteen year old girl.

And you agreed?

There was no other option. I was just a student, very young and dependent on my father even for pocket money. I couldn't have done a thing on my own. Besides, our love was juvenile. In hindsight, it was good for me.

Threw away the old toy as soon as you got a new one?

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You can say that. This girl was also very beautiful. The only issue was their poverty.

And what happened to the other girl?

What could have happened? Nothing happened. Even for her it was just a weakness of the heart in a young age. Two years later she too got married. Everything is well and good. Like I said, our love was juvenile.

Yes, juvenile love is like water colours. Gets washed away with water.

Absolutely! You seem to be quite witty. A little while back you gave the example of toys and now that of colours.

I used to be. But you know what I feel?

What?

All love is juvenile. There is nothing like strong love.

Why do you say that?

Just felt like saying.

Well. I don't bother much about love these days. I am a married man with kids. Can't think about all these anymore. Besides, I have to take care of my family business. It takes my toll!

What business?

Paints and building materials.

Then you must be very rich.

We used to be once. When we had a joint family. We had a three generation old business. It was quite big. But my father and uncles decided to split. Hence these hard times.

How hard?

Pretty hard. The old shop at Canning Street went to my eldest uncle.

My father and his younger brother had to move south and take up new shops. New establishments take there own time to get settled.

That's true. But I am sure these hard times won't last long.

That they won't. That's because ours is a three generation old business.

We know all the tricks of the trade. By the way, what do you do?

Me? Well, I don't do much.

Unemployed?

You can say that. The country is full of unemployed youth. Just think I am one of them.

Don't lose hope. You are still young; something or the other will work out.

That's what keeps me alive.

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So, how do you survive? Do you take tuition classes?

No. that's not my cup of tea. Just getting along somehow.

Why mister, what's wrong with tuitions? My friend is earning loads by taking English and maths tuitions. Besides being a school teacher, he teaches some five six batches of students at home everyday. Gifted his wife a diamond ring on their anniversary!

They are great men. I don't have such knowledge or patience.

You look pretty young. Must be twenty six or seven?

Twenty eight running.

How come at such an age you are here at the lake alone, instead of being with friends. Even a girl friend would have made sense.

I don't have any friends or girl friends.

What? This is not at all a good sign, mister.

I know.

Are you not amicable? Or you like being alone?

I don't mind being alone. Gives me ample opportunity to think.

I see. So. What do you think about?

About this world, about this life, about life and death.

Oh, that everybody thinks about. But these are not productive thoughts. These are idle thoughts.

You are right, idle thoughts. My favourite.

But you need to think about work also.

Somehow I just cannot think about work.

Why? You don't feel like earning some money? In this world there is no power like that of money.

That's what I am noticing.

And still you feel like sitting idle?

That's why people think I am an absolute good for nothing.

I know it's not simple to get a job these days and the market is also very tight for business, but even in this market I am sure you can earn a living?

I am sure. I am sure. I do want to earn a living. But I am king of laziness. Just can't fire up that want.

I can understand. You are like my uncle. He is also very lazy. He is a lawyer with a double M.A. son of a barrister with a thriving practice and established clients, but he just doesn't want to move an inch, there is no effort, no enterprise.

What happened to him?

What can happen? Rich father's son. Was whiling away his time in luxury. But after his father's death, brothers split and now he is in

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dire straits. His wife pushes him to the court, but how can a practice flourish like this? He is buried in debt.

Right, my nature is like your uncle's.

That's why I say fire up your want and get into some work.

Everything doesn't suit everybody. Like God has created men of work, so has he made some idle men. It's good to have both in this world.

You are talking about the world? But don't you see it is only our useless country that is crowded with these idle unemployed people? And it is because of this the country is going to the dogs. Leave alone Nepal or China, look at these young countries like Malaysia or Thailand! Can't imagine the kind of progress they have done! No mister, can't agree with you. This world is not for idle people.

So it must be.

What's your name?

Shantanu.

I am Manas. So, how far have you done your studies?

Don't mention studies. Nothing worthwhile happens to an idle man, and I am no exception.

And studies don't help much these days anyway, besides technical knowledge. That's true.

So, you are just whiling your time like this, sitting alone, thinking and doing nothing?

More or less.

I just cannot live without doing anything. I feel suffocated if I take leave for even a day or two. There is a kind of pleasure in work too, isn't it?

Definitely there is.

You don't feel like enjoying that pleasure?

Yes, yes, I do. The world of my desires is very big. Just that the world of my work is very small. But I respect people who take pleasure in their work. The world runs because of such people. And because of men like you, we, idle beings, get some food and shelter.

Then imagine how important it is to work.

Definitely. My father also tells me the same thing.

So, what does your father do?

Just this and that.

What do you mean, this and that?

He is a professional liar.

Professional liar? Ha ha, you make me laugh.

It's not funny. He deals with the law.

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Oh! So he is a lawyer?

Something like that.

Why something like that? Must be something definite. Either he is a lawyer or....

Lawyer. But practices Income Tax.

Oh I see. That's very good. There is loads of money.

Just manage to get along.

No mister, your face had me in doubt. You must be from a rich family.

Is money everything?

As time passes, is it not the only truth that makes sense, that there is nothing above money? The centre of our existence is money.

Sometimes it seems like that.

So?

That is what I think about all the time.

Oh mister, what is there to think about in this? Blindly just have to keep earning money.

Is that so?

If you have money, then you can have everything. But of course, there is no point telling you this. You have a rich father. You definitely understand the value of money.

No, I don't. I think I am allergic to money.

How is that?

Can't explain. I don't like to think about that.

If you earn yourself, you'll feel better. Did you sigh?

Yes, couldn't resist.

Didn't like what I said? Quite natural. Rich kids will never like what I said.

You were also a rich kid.

So what? My father did not pamper me a bit. Got me into the business even before I could shave. Since then I am toiling.

Toiling? Does that mean even you are not quite fond of this daily race for money?

That was a slip of tongue. No mister, initially it was tiring, but now I quite enjoy it. My father did the right thing. Toiling, yes, but remember toiling gets you the harvest.

That's true. My father also wants me to toil.

Does he? That's good!

Not only my father, even my mother wants that, everybody wants that.

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Just throw away these insignificant weaknesses of the heart and stand up! The moment you start earning, your outlook towards life will change.

You mean it?

Yes, Mr. Shantanu, I mean it with all my heart.

Lot of people have said that with conviction. These days people in Information Technology get salaries in lakhs. Earlier there was not such craze for money. What do we need so much money for, Mr. Manas?

Oh, there is no dearth of ideas to utilize money. There are so many avenues today. There is the share market and then there are such varied investment opportunities, there are new enterprises.

I know, from America to China, Japan, Malaysia, in the entire world, poetry has died, art has died, life is gone, pure music is gone, theatre is gone, technology will engulf everything.

Those are just entertainment. They will also remain. Amongst work, there has to be some culture somewhere. But culture should not exceed its limit. Consider poetry. Tagore has written so much that we don't need any poets anymore. When we have Sakespeare and Girish Ghosh, why do you want to waste more time on theatre? Leave these evil thoughts as soon as you can or you will be in grave danger soon. Your father's money will not last you a lifetime.

Father's money? No, I don't really need my father's money.

That's what I am saying. Do something. Try and get self dependent. Did you sigh again?

Yes, these days I sigh a lot.

Why so?

Thinking about the world. What do people do with so much money?

First mess with some money, then you will know.

How much money do you think I should mess with before I can know?

Thousands, lakhs, the more you mess with, the more you will know. What's so funny?

If I mess with lakhs, I will know? Then why am I yet to know?

You? That means you mess with money? Is it?

I am idle. So I used to sit and paint. Seeing my interest in painting, my father got me into an Arts College.

You paint? You paint pictures? How does it help?

That's what I think. I used to paint for my pleasure. Went to Paris, Italy, learnt a lot. But then the problem arose.

What problem?

Whatever I paint gets sold in a jiffy.

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What are you saying?

Come home and you'll see there is not a single painting left. All sold. Big customers sit outside with bundles of money waiting for my next painting.

What?

That's my problem, can't even sit in peace and paint a picture, money has cast its shadows even in my art. The more I think of this worldly affliction, the more I get disheartened.

You are younger than me, but I would still like to touch your feet. Money out of painting! Is that possible too?

It is happening, can't stop it.

Can I ask you something?

Sure.

How much do you save per painting?

Colours and canvasses don't cost much, a thousand or so. The paintings sell for say around one and a half or two lakhs, sometimes even more. I hike the rates anticipating customers to shy off. But the higher the rates the more is the sale.

Don't say any more.

No. I won't.

No, mister, I am feeling dizzy.

Go and splash some water from the lake.

Yes, yes, that will be good.

Translated from Bengali by Parthasarathi Chakraborti

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The Second Mother

Pattukkottai Prabhakar

All the way from the office, while waiting for the signal to change, even while getting the petrol filled up, I raked up my memory, but could not place the person.

From the time, the watchman of our apartment complex telephoned to say that an old lady, who said she had come from Chidambaram and felt that I would recognize her from the name "Kamakshi", I have been trying to place her but without success.

I reached the apartment, parked my bike in the allotted parking space, opened the letter box with its key, collected the mail and took the lift to my flat in the fourth floor.

There was an old lady with a box reclining on the wall, with hands tightly wrapped around her knees in front of my flat, but I still could not remember her.

On seeing me, she got up, her eyes brightened. When she held me with her shrivelled hand and in a quivering voice enquired, "Ganesu, how are you?" the voice seemed to ring a bell.

"Yes, I remember you, but I am not able to recollect immediately. You are...," I began.

Her already shrunken face, shrank further. "Have you forgotten me? When you were a hosteller in Chidambaram, while studying, how often have you come to my house? I am Anbarasan's mother."

Immediately, having remembered everything, I became flustered.

"Please forgive me, Mother. The last time, I met you was 20 years ago. That is why I have forgotten. Come mother, come inside."

I opened the door and lifted her box also.

I removed the washed clothes and newspapers from the sofa, made her sit, switched the fan on, opened the windows and gave her some water to drink.

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"I was told that you are living with your family," she enquired.

My wife is also employed. It will be seven by the time, she returns. Son is studying in plus two. After school, he attends his tuition classes and then returns home. They will all come now. How is Anbarasan?"

"He is fine!" she said with a deep sigh which implied the secret, that all was not well.

"For four or five years after college, we corresponded with each other. Later, that also stopped. Mother, what is he doing?"

"He runs a travel agency."

"How many children?"

"Two sons. Both are studying in school."

Why have you come to Chennai?"

As if this was the cue, she broke down completely, and wailed in a loud voice, "I don't know why death spares me. I have to face what all I am fated to."

"Why do you talk like this Mother? What happened?"

She said in a broken voice, "How can one stay even for a minute in that house when a son tells his mother, who gave him birth, 'only when you die I will have peace', you tell me?"

Anbarasan's mother was sleeping on a fine grass mat in the hall, the children were sleeping in their room.

I was sitting near the window with a book in my hand but not able to read a word as I was thinking. Keerthana came near me after finishing her work in the kitchen. She asked, "Dear, what are you going to do?"

I said, "That's what I don't understand."

"Why don't you take leave from the office, visit your friend in Chidambaram and talk to him?"

"But she says, he is not to be informed at all. Put me in an orphanage is what she says."

"She is speaking in anger. The anger will subside after four days."

"She is very badly upset, Keerthana. Even if Anbarasan and his wife come and beg forgiveness by falling at her feet, she does not appear to be in a mood to go. She is that firm in her resolution."

"Which house is free of anger and frustration? Definitely she will change her mind. You make the trip to Chidambaram."

In Chidambaram, Anbarasan has moved into a new house. It took a couple of hours to locate it.

Anbarasan, who opened the door, had changed beyond recognition.

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He was surprised but welcomed me, introduced his sons studying in the seventh and ninth standards.

"Why this sudden visit?"

"Anbu, your mother is now staying in my house," I said.

"Is she there? In Madras, there is a relative who is like an uncle to me. She has left a letter saying that she was going there."

"She thought you would pacify her and bring her back after a week and to avoid that she did not go there. Instead she searched and with great difficulty has reached my house. She does not know that I have come here. What is all this?"

Anbarasan remained with his head bent for a very long time. When he looked up, there were tears in his eyes.

It was wrong, Ganesh, definitely very wrong. A word which a son should never utter. The word slipped out unintentionally in a moment of extreme anger. For that I have already asked for forgiveness at least ten times. I have fallen at her feet."

"She didn't tell me you have expressed regret."

"Promise, I did ask. Both my wife and she cannot get along with each other. They always fight. Neither can give in to the other. Imagine, how things would be if in the same house they do not talk to each other for three months at a stretch. I have scolded my wife many times. I have even slapped her twice. I have pleaded with my mother many times not to use words that could hurt or belittle her. After scolding my wife, in a moment of extreme anger, I said those words which I should have never uttered to my mother. Immediately realizing my mistake, I prostrated at my mother's feet and asked for forgiveness. For a week she did not speak to me. Then suddenly, she left leaving a letter. In anger, I shouted at my wife. She too packed her bags and left for her mother's house in a huff. Now you tell me, how to appease each and bring them back?"

The tears in his eyes confirmed the sincerity of his words.

"Do not misunderstand me, Anbu. She has given birth to you, brought you up. She may have certain traits which you do not like. She may have a lot of self-respect. Only you may have to be more accommodating."

"I am ready. You want me to fall at her feet, thousand times in front of hundred people...I'll do that. To the best of my ability, I try to keep her happy. I have affection for her. I am aware of my duty and responsibility towards her. She is very important to me. But at the same time, is not my wife, who has come along trusting me, not important? She is happy with me. Can I divorce her just because she does not respect my mother?"

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"No, no."

"Did my mother say what she wrote in the letter?"

"No."

"She had written, 'do not come holding the olive branch to pacify me. I'll never stay in this house."

'Separation strengthens the bond. Wait for another ten days. After that, first bring home your wife. Talk to her. Make her understand. Then you both come to my house. Till then, Mother can stay with me. I'll talk to her tactfully. Everything will be fine. Right?"

"Look, now you have to face an unnecessary problem."

"Oh, it is nothing. Hey, how often has your mother fed me?"

"Look, I have been talking without even making a cup of coffee for you," said Anbarasan and got up.

Keerthana, Anbarasan's mother and myself went to the temple. We sat under a shade in the courtyard surrounding the inner shrine of the temple.

"I did not go on office work. I had gone only to meet Anbarasan," I began calmly and narrated everything.

She remained quiet for a long time. She sighed deeply.

"Water cannot get separated by beating itself away. But some words hurt to the core. Anger is my second nature. Sometimes, I do lose my poise and speak harshly. If I go back, she will not return. To ensure that they stay together, it is better that I stay away. If you feel I am a burden, tell me. I will find refuge in some charity home or temple."

I said, "Please remain calm, Mother. Everything will change."

She spoke wistfully about what all she had done for her daughter-in-law out of fondness and how on various occasions she supported her before others.

She told Keerthana, "How can mothers not like the girl who enter their son's life as a second mother? It is a sort of immaturity only. It may even be a sort of jealousy that the wife gets all her son's love. But she is the one who elevates the mother-in-law's position from that of a mother to a grandmother, thereby the family's lineage is extended."

Days passed with such frequent open-hearted discussions.

Anbarasan telephoned after a week. "Ganesh, I have brought my wife back. After daily preaching she has become amenable. Tell Mother that we both are coming tomorrow."

They came. Anbarasan's wife prostrated at his mothers feet.

"Please forgive me athai*. The way your son's uttering of one word

* mother-in-law is addressed like this

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hurt you, that is how I have been hurt by you. It is not that I do not have any regard or respect for you. I too have a lot of expectations. I too have plenty of faults. I have hurt you. Forget everything, please."

Anbarasan also spoke in such a passionate way that his mother's resistance melted and she got ready to leave with them.

As she was leaving she said, "Ganesu, you will do very well. You have looked after me like another son. Farewell."

That night, I was sitting on my bed with a pillow supporting my back. Keerthana cut an apple and gave me a piece. I kept it aside and looked at her.

"Yes?" she said in a conciliatory tone.

"Because you asked her, 'Do you have any sense?' my mother has not stepped into our house for the past three years and has been staying with my elder brother. Keerthana, let us go and pacify her and bring her back to our house. What do you say?"

Keerthana said, "Have you started again? Do you remember what she said in reply? I have not forgotten."

I beseeched mentally, "Forgive me, Mother."

Translated from Tamil by Vimala Balakrishnan ❑

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A Matter of Faith

Khursheed Alam

Ghafoor Bhai had been a man of faith for many years. He used to pray five times a day. Even when he moved to a new town, he never missed his prayers. But after marriage, the trials and tribulations that followed soon changed it all. The chain of events and changes in his life were linked to his responsibilities as husband and bread-winner.

The first three years of marriage blessed Ghafoor and Mariam with two daughters while death claimed Ghafoor's aged father. It was not long before the household expenses began to mount till they became a heavy burden. It made Ghafoor cling to his job like never before. He did it with such tenacity that prayers took second place and his faith in God slowly dwindled. He missed his prayer sessions and it wasn't long before he stopped praying altogether. He began to lose touch with reality and soon drifted into a state of mind where he believed himself to be an atheist. Though he reasoned within himself that this change was inevitable and progressive, he did not prevent his sixty-year-old mother and wife Mariam, who was nearing thirty, from praying regularly. His mind would often dwell on the thought that God would take care of poor people like him and that one day his burden would lighten and life would get happier and comfortable for his growing family. Well, may God's will prevail. The major part of life is over, rest will follow.

Now, after fifteen years of marriage, his family had three more additions—two daughters and a son. The birth of four daughters in quick succession followed by the arrival of a son made Ghafoor stop and think about social changes that he felt were necessary. As a member of society he felt it was his responsibility to control his family size and therein the compulsion to undergo vasectomy. Unfortunately he discussed this with Mariam, who promptly sought the opinion of Ammi Jaan, her mother-in-law. As expected, all hell broke loose.

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By nature, Ghafoor Bhai was a shy but open-minded person. He encouraged revolutionary ideas and would ponder over them. He would weigh their pros and cons carefully over and over again. But this mental exercise often resulted in Ghafoor believing that social progress rested on his shoulders. He imagined himself to be a revolutionary leader on whom the world depended. At the same time he considered himself to be a peace-loving man and therefore persuaded himself to suffer all these thoughts in silence.

That is exactly what happened when he confided in Mariam about his intentions of undergoing vasectomy. His very dear Ammi Jaan suddenly developed a coughing fit and his wife who kept calling out God's name, begged him to change his mind. The peace-loving Ghafoor could not bear to see their unhappy faces and quickly dropped the idea of the operation. Ghafoor strongly believed that everything that happened was part of God's design and will. Thus his present state was indeed ordained by the wishes of the Almighty. He had no choice but to abide by it.

According to the latest government records, Ghafoor Ahmed, son of Mr. Shakur Ahmed, was heavily shackled with debt. There was a home loan, festival advance, society loan and an advance against his provident fund, which he had taken from time to time. These loans only resulted in shrinking his monthly salary that soon became a source of embarrassment. Every month Ghafoor would place his salary packet in Mariam's hands. He couldn't help noticing the change in those once beautiful hands. They had looked so fair, soft and delicate when he had married her. Mariam made a pretty sight when she blushed and sighed Hi Allah.

Ghafoor soon learnt that Mariam had taken on a job of making 'bidi'. Secretly, Ghafoor Bhai was pleased and was also relieved. The family could do with the extra income. But his ego prompted him to say "Why are you taking this trouble"? Mariam did not think it necessary to answer him.

In his leisure time Ghafoor would often step into the lobby of the hotel that stood opposite his house to read the daily newspaper. He started to avoid his friends and colleagues and spoke very little in the office. He feared that if he was drawn into a conversation he would have to answer some unpleasant questions that pertained to his financial status. If this became common knowledge it would upset him to no end. So the only person he chatted with was his neighbour, Karim Bhai, who, in his heyday, was a well-known wrestler. However, now, in his sunset years, cock-fighting and chess were his main pastimes. Ghafoor Bhai was his partner at chess. Karim couldn't think of a better partner, for Ghafoor was a passive player and never got upset when he lost.

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if his knight was killed, what did it matter? If perchance he won, it was fine, if he lost, there were no ill feelings. Ghafoor's attitude towards chess was not any different from his approach to life. Therefore, for Karim Bhai, Ghafoor Bhai was just the right partner who merely existed for his family. Karim Bhai was a witness to all that happened in Ghafoor's house. He watched the children fall sick and recover. He was aware of their monetary problems and the loans taken. He watched Ghafoor resort to pampering his children when boredom set in. When angry he knew that Ghafoor would mentally dwell on the country's current affairs and calm down. Though life could not offer his friend very much at this stage, Karim was aware that Ghafoor commanded respect in the neighborhood and was held in esteem by the people of the town.

One day, it so happened, that on reaching the office he was about to sign the register when he noticed that underneath it was an envelope addressed to him. He was filled with astonishment. He hardly ever received letters. Nevertheless, he felt excited to see an envelope officially stamped and addressed to him. Ghafoor opened the envelope. It contained a printed sheet. The heading in bold letters said "Children of God, follow this, read this, it is a fact". In small print it continued "From Madina Munawara, I, Sheikh Ahmed, send you this Testimony. One Friday night while I was reading the Quran Shariff, I fell asleep. Hazrat Mohmed Saheb appeared in my dream and said that bad times have come. Ladies don't take care of their husbands, they don't wear veil, children disobey their parents. People forget about alms-giving during Haj. Hazrat Mohmed Sheikh went on. Sheikh Ahmed, you are the one who can make people understand that they should have faith in the Quran, they should fast on Mondays, pray and give alms. Doomsday is at hand. Anyone who distributes copies of this will be recommended by us and will be shown the path to heaven. Anyone who distributes 150 copies of this testimony will receive happiness within 14 days.

"In Bombay a man distributed 500 copies and his son who was on his death-bed was saved. One man distributed 100 copies and all his unfinished jobs were completed. One man who did not believe in this and insulted it, lost his young son. You will have to take the trouble of printing and distributing this letter but as you have faith in the Quran, have faith in this letter and get 1000 or 500 copies printed and distributed; with the will of God take the path of honesty. Aamin."

Ghafoor Bhai felt anger rising in him as he read through the letter. He believed that reading this letter would only get him into trouble. If he had had the slightest hint what the envelope contained, he would never have opened it. Oh! It was too late now! He tried to identify the sender's

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signature, but failed. He scrutinized the post office stamp on the envelope, but it told him nothing. "Which idiot has sent this out of enmity?" he thought to himself.

Though Ghafoor had given up praying, the rest of his family continued to pray and believe in Allah as their protector. But in his heart Ghafoor feared God. As he read the letter, he was carried away by his fears. He imagined the author of the letter to be a kidnapper looking for a ransom. Could it be a plot to kill his only son? For quite a while such ideas raged through Ghafoor's mind. Finally, he picked up courage and decided that the letter was indeed nonsense and deserved to be destroyed. One moment found him in a state of bravado as he stood up from his chair; but the next moment saw him slump back with a thud at the thought of something terrible happening to his wife or children. He suddenly felt weak and uneasy. He folded the letter and slipped it into his shirt pocket. He soon started to feel better, and chasing away his fears turned his attention to his office work. Somehow the day passed and he returned home.

Back home, he found his wife and his eldest daughter Farida busy rolling bidis. For some time, he silently sat on the bed. He then went to Karim Bhai's house. After exchanging greetings, the chess board was laid out. Without thinking Ghafoor Bhai placed his knight in front of the rook. And for the very first time he felt bad at losing a game. Karim Bhai looked at him and suspected that something was amiss. Initially Ghafoor Bhai tried to hide his helplessness, but on Karim Bhai's insistence and with a heavy heart he revealed the story of the letter. Karimbhai listened with serious attention. He made Ghafoor read the letter again and then advised him that it would be better to have copies of the letter printed and distributed; otherwise only God knows what will happen, he said. He reasoned thus: "God never hurts his own children, but even then, there was no harm in printing the letters."

Ghafoor Bhai returned home and placed the letter between the pages of the Quran. Some days passed and he firmly resolved that for the moment he would not print that letter. He liked that part of Karim Bhai's dialogue where he said that God did not harm anybody.

A week passed and Ghafoor Bhai had almost forgotten the letter. Life went on as usual at its own pace. The season changed. It was October and winter had just set in. At this time Ghafoor Bhai's only son Salim fell ill. It began with a cold. As always, in such situations the family would depend on Hakimji, their trusted physician. Mariam took her son to Hakimji and returned with some packets of medicine. Five painful days passed. Salim's cold did not improve. Worse, he developed a bad cough. Late

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one night, Salim began to cough endlessly for a long time. The noise awoke Ghafoor Bhai who began to inquire about the cough. He was told that the child had been ill for seven to eight days and Hakimji's medicine was having no effect. Mariam gently patted Salim who soon fell asleep but Ghafoor Bhai could not sleep. He suddenly remembered the letter he had received two weeks earlier. He felt responsible as a father and moreover Salim was his only son. For the rest of the night he tossed and turned in bed. He kept telling himself that this was a mere twist of fate and that God Almighty would not wreak vengeance on his children. Doubts lingered in his mind. He felt like talking about it to Mariam, and was hesitant at the same time. He had no one else to turn to. So first thing the next morning, he hesitantly started to talk about the letter and then abruptly stopped in mid-sentence saying "could this possibly be...?" Mariam was a very understanding woman. But after listening to her husband she became anxious and started to cry. Ghafoor Bhai suddenly felt guilty. After further discussion, Mariam convinced Ghafoor that at least 500 copies of the letter ought to be printed and quickly distributed. She hastened to reveal that she had saved fifty rupees from making bidis which could be put to use for this noble work so that God would bless their children with health and happiness. When Ghafoor Bhai heard about the fifty rupees he felt relieved. In his heart he still felt that they should drop the idea of printing the letter and take Salim to a good doctor instead. Dr. Nigam was a good doctor but his fees were high. Ghafoor was planning to borrow a sum of Rs. 60/ 70 for treatment that would put Salim right. But again, the contents of the chain letter started to haunt him so much that he could neither think nor discuss the matter with Mariam.

By six o'clock that evening, Salim still showed no improvement inspite of taking all the doses given by Hakimji. His cough only worsened. Finally Ghafoor Bhai softly said, "Let's go and show him to Dr. Nigam. I will borrow money from the Moulavi. He will say some unpleasant things but will relent and give the money." Mariam replied "Nothing will happen to my dear son, all you need to do is to get the copies of the letter printed." Ammi Jaan added, "because of God's anger he has fallen ill. Get the copies of the letter printed and he will be all right." Hearing this, Ghafoor Bhai felt relieved. Now getting any kind of loan was difficult and almost impossible for a poor person like Ghafoor Bhai. They all understood this very well. Ghafoor Bhai left for the printing press. On his way he mulled over the situation and the problems he was facing. Then he thought to himself "All right, let me get some fun out of this by posting these letters to important personalities such as

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the Prime Minister, Chief Minister, all the Members of the Parliament, etc. But, I will not send copies to any poor person."

The letters were soon ready at the press. Ghafoor felt bad parting with forty-five rupees; but there was no other way. He returned home with the letters. Ammi and Mariam looked very satisfied. Immediately, one letter was placed in front of the Quran for blessings. Ghafoor Bhai then touched Salim's chest and it heaved as though a machine was pumping within. He felt very depressed. He said, "I'm going to read the newspapers." and left the house. He regretted having acted on the advice of the ladies and having told his wife about the letter. While passing through the market, he couldn't help glancing at Dr. Nigam's clinic. As usual, there was a crowd.

He stopped in front of the clinic for a few seconds and then started walking towards the hotel. In the lobby he kept turning the pages of the newspaper. After about three quarters of an hour, his youngest daughter came running to say that Salim's condition had deteriorated. His breathing had become erratic and pulse faint. Everybody at home was crying. Karim Bhai urged Ghafoor to send for the doctor. Ghafoor lost all thoughts about the doctor's fees. At the most he would be insulted. So what? He didn't care. He rushed towards Dr Nigam's clinic. He pleaded and brought the doctor home promising to settle his fees immediately.

The clock showed 9 p.m. Salim was lying on the only bed in the house, covered with a blanket that was torn and patched in several places. Mariam's gentle hands caressed her only son's limp body under the blanket desperately trying to restore its ebbing breath. There were tears in her eyes. Dr. Nigam placed his stethoscope on Salim's chest and immediately shook his head. He then gently put his arm around Ghafoor's shoulders and said "I'm sorry Ghafoor Bhai, it was double pneumonia. Had you called me an hour ago, there would have been some hope." All the family gathered around the bed and tears rained on the patched blanket. Ghafoor Bhai gave out a loud cry and lifting up his son's body hugged it very tightly. At that very moment Mariam, who was sobbing bitterly, got up, took the bundle of printed letters and flung it on the burning stove. The papers fell into a vessel of dal which had been boiling for over an hour. The dal had spilled over and burnt, sticking to the sides of the vessel. The stove hissed and the dal spluttered but Ghafoor Bhai alone heard it.

Translated from Urdu by Rani Motwani

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First Prize : Subrata Basu

Kiranmala

This is a transcript of a Bengali folk tale that was once very popular. With *Kiranmala* now in real danger of being vanquished by *Harry Potter*, I recently recorded the tale as it was told by a young urban woman to her six-year-old, very male, son. Oral literature mutates with every telling, and it can be seen that this raconteur too, while drawing substantially on the version given in the hundred-year-old classic *Thaku'mar Jhuli* (Granny's Hamper), was making interesting changes to it.

1

The king one day calls his minister and asks, 'Minister! Are my subjects happy or unhappy?'

Scratching his head loudly, *khosh-khosh khosh-khosh,* the minister says, 'Your majesty, should I speak with fear or without fear?'

'Without fear or you'll be without a head!'

'In earlier times, my lord, kings would go hunting. By day they would hunt in the jungle and by night they would come back in disguise to watch the condition of their subjects. Those days are gone, those times are gone too. Now people live each in their own way.'

'You say so? I'll also go hunting from tomorrow!'

2

The king goes hunting. Of course, he hunts for show only - a few tigers and elephants now and then. After dark he puts on his disguise and comes back to watch the condition of his subjects.

One cold, rainy night, passing by a poor man's hut, he hears three girls talking inside. The king pricks up his ears.

The oldest girl says, 'If I were married to the king's groom I could sleep in the king's stable now!' A groom is one who looks after horses, and a stable is where horses are kept.

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The second girl says, 'If I were married to the king's cook I could fill my tummy with the king's leavings now!'

The youngest girl says nothing. Her sisters press her, 'Come! Why don't you speak?'

After a lot of badgering and after a lot of thinking the youngest girl says, 'If I were married to the king I could be the queen now.'

Her sisters roll over laughing. 'My, my! She and her fancies!'

3

Next day the king *has* the three girls brought to him.

'Last night which of you said what, tell me.'

They do not utter a word. With an angry glare the king says, 'Speak or you will be punished very hard!'

The two older girls then own up everything, but the youngest girl still says nothing. With a little smile at her the king says, 'I heard everything. Ok, you will each have what you wanted.'

So the oldest girl goes to sleep in the king's stable, the second one goes to fill her tummy with the king's leavings, and the youngest one goes to become queen and keep house for the king.

4

A year goes by. The queen will have a baby. 'For a whole year I haven't seen my sisters,' she grieves. 'If they were here they could have looked after me now.'

How can the king say no?

So one canopied path is laid to his groom's house and another canopied path is laid to his cook's house. Laughing and dancing the two sisters come to take care of the queen.

But when they look around the royal household they burn in envy at their sister's luck.

The queen does not understand this. All day her sisters sneak in and out of her room and the queen asks, 'What's it, Sisters, what's it?' They say, 'N-n-nothing, just looking for the things you'll need when you have your baby.'

Exactly at midnight the queen has a son, lovely as the moon. Her two wicked sisters hastily stuff the baby's mouth with salt, put it into a clay pot and send it floating away in the river, hoping it will die before long.

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The king comes and asks, 'What is it? Boy or girl?'

'Neither. A pup,' they say.

The king hangs down his head and goes away.

The next year the queen has another son, lovely as the moon. Her two wicked sisters again stuff the baby's mouth with salt, put it into a clay pot and send it floating away in the river.

They then tell the king, 'It was a kitten.'

The king hangs down his head and goes away.

The following year the queen has a daughter, this one too lovely as the moon. This time too her two wicked sisters stuff the baby's mouth with salt, put it into a clay pot and send it floating away in the river.

'It was a wooden doll,' they tell the king.

The king hangs down his head and goes away.

Now people start talking. 'What's this? What kind of a woman has our king married? First a pup, then a kitten, and now a wooden doll! The queen's a witch for sure.'

The king thinks so too.

The hapless queen's head is shaved and bathed in whey. She is then seated face backward on a donkey and driven out of the kingdom, much like Goopi in the film *Goopi Gayen Bagha Bayen.*

5

Every day a pious Brahman goes to the river to take his bath and to say his prayers. He finds the three clay pots one after the other and takes the babies home.

The Brahman is a very wealthy man but has no children. He is beside himself with joy at finding the three babies. He names the two boys Arun and Barun; the girl he names Kiranmala.

Days pass and nights pass. Arun, Barun and Kiranmala, lovely as the moon, wax like the moon. When they laugh, wild birds sing; when they cry, wild beasts come running. Happily the brothers and sister grow up. Arun and Barun learn their lessons, pluck fruits and run about playing with deer in the forest. Kiranmala doesn't let a speck of dust lie anywhere about the house, and doesn't let even a fly sit on her cow Hashi or on her pet deer Khushi. The three of them bring in baskets of flowers for the Brahman's puja and for decorating the house.

In this way Arun and Barun learn all the learning of the Brahman and Kiranmala learns all about keeping house. Then one day the Brahman calls them and says, 'Good bye, children! Take care of yourselves.' The brothers and sister start crying; the Brahman goes to heaven.

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Meanwhile, the king's palace is sunk in gloom. At last the king can bear it no more and says, 'No! I must go hunting again!'

The king goes hunting and on the very day a terrible rainstorm breaks. He is cut off from his companions, loses his way, and spends the night under the pouring rain in the hollow of a tree.

Next day there is a blazing sun, no trace of a cloud and not a drop of water anywhere to drink. Dying of thirst, the king at last spots a house in the distance and stumbles towards it.

Arun and Barun are amazed at the sight of a man in glittering dress. Kiran comes and stands by her brothers.

The king cries, 'Give me water! Save me!' Kiran runs off and brings water.

After quenching his thirst the king asks, 'Who are you, my angels, living in this lonely place?'

Arun says, 'We are a Brahman's children.'

'Children of an ordinary Brahman!' the king wonders. His heart throbs but he cannot utter a word. Finally, somehow fighting his tears he says, 'I'm the unlucky king of this land, dears. If ever you need anything, let me know.'

After the king has left Kiran asks, 'What is a king, Brothers?'

Arun says, 'I don't know much but I have read in books that a king has elephants and horses and a palace.'

'We too will have a palace then,' says Kiran.

Arun and Barun jump at the idea: 'Right!'

7

Day and night they work. Kiran brings bucket after bucket of water; Arun and Barun build. After twelve months and thirty-six days the palace is completed. It is made of the whitest marble, with silver doors and golden towers. Gods and demons come and gape at it.

One day a monk, passing by on the other side of the river, calls out, 'Who are you that have built this wonderful palace?'

'We—Arun, Barun and Kiranmala—two brothers and a sister,' Arun shouts back from inside.

The monk says, 'But your palace still hasn't a few things. In the garden it must have a silver tree with golden fruits, and a golden bird singing on it. Only then will your palace be perfect.'

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Arun, Barun and Kiran all three ask together, 'Where can we find the silver tree with golden fruits and the golden bird?'

The monk replies, 'East of north, north of east is the Magic Mountain. There you can find these things! But beware, it's a dangerous place!'

8

Arun says, 'Barun, Kiran! I'll go to the Magic Mountain. Keep this sword. If ever it rusts, know that I'm no more.'

Every day Barun or Kiran brings out the sword and looks over it. One morning Barun's face pales and he cries out, 'Sister, Brother is no more. Now I must go. Keep this bow. If ever its string breaks, know that I'm no more too.'

Kiran looks at the bow and prays, 'O God, let one brother bring back the other!'

The moment Barun steps on the Magic Mountain, an eerie, weird music rings out on all sides, fairies start dancing before him and voices keep calling from behind, 'Prince! Prince! Look back! Look back! Listen!'

Barun looks back and is turned into stone. He barely has the time to think, 'Brother too was turned into stone like me.'

9

Kiranmala gets up at dawn and finds the string of the bow broken. Both her brothers are gone. But she doesn't cry, doesn't waste time wiping tears. She fills Hashi's manger with fodder, kisses Khushi, waters the plants, and then donning a prince's attire, with a coronet on her head and a sword in her hand, she sets off for the Magic Mountain like a whirlwind.

Crossing the shimmering Three Fields in a day and the Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers in a night she reaches the Magic Mountain. Immediately ghosts and goblins, tigers and bears, buffaloes and snakes close in on her, all roaring, bellowing and hissing at the same time. Sweet voices call from behind, 'Prince! Look back! Look back!' But all in vain. Shutting her eyes tight and gripping her sword she heads straight for the silver tree.

As soon as she reaches the silver tree, the golden bird on it chirps out, 'You've come? You've come? Good! Good! Take the water of the spring, raise your sword and strike that drum with it. Quick!'

Kiran does as the golden bird tells her. Instantly the Magic Mountain

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falls quiet. Only birds sing and peacocks dance. The golden bird says, 'Kiran, now sprinkle the spring water.' Kiran does so, and all the hills and boulders around her stir and come to life. Princes of all ages that were turned into stone sit up, yawning and stretching their limbs.

Thousands of princes then bow their heads to Kiran and chant with folded hands,

'Hail the greatest hero of Seven Ages!'

With tears in their eyes Arun and Barun cry, 'Hail our dear little sister!'

The golden bird sings out from above, 'Hail! Hail the three heroes of the world—

Arun, Barun and Kiranmala!'

10

Returning home, they fill Hashi's manger with fresh fodder, give Khushi a bath, clean up the house, water the plants, sow the seed of the silver tree and pour on it the spring water from the Magic Mountain. In no time the silver tree shoots up, opens leaves and bears golden fruits. They then tell the golden bird, 'Bird! Now sit on the tree.' The golden bird sits on the silver tree and breaks into a thousand tunes. The brothers and sister fall into each other's arms.

At night the golden bird says, 'Arun, Barun, Kiran! Now ask the king to dinner.'

'But what will we serve him?'

'That I'll tell you later.'

Next morning they go and invite the king.

The golden bird says, 'Kiran, hang my perch in the dining hall.'

The king comes and is stunned at what he sees. In every nook and cranny there is a thousand times more wealth than in his whole palace. He feels happy and sad by turns: 'Alas! If they were my children!'

Then the king sits down to dinner. He puts out his hand to lift food and immediately pulls it back. 'What's this?' he says. 'Food made of gold, silver and diamond! Can a human being eat this? Are you poking fun at me, Kiran?'

A voice rings out from above, 'Can a human being give birth to a pup, my lord?'

'Huh?'

'Can a human being give birth to a kitten?'

'Huh?' The king looks up and sees it's the golden bird speaking.

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'Your majesty, if it's impossible for a human being to eat this food then how is it possible for a human being to give birth to a wooden doll?'

The king leaps to his feet and says, 'O God, O God, what have I done!'

The golden bird says, 'Now you know, my lord? These are your children. Their wicked aunts fooled you with a pup, kitten and wooden doll.'

Trembling and weeping, the king draws Arun, Barun and Kiran to his breast and cries, 'Alas, if my poor queen were here now!'

The golden bird then says in a whisper, 'Arun, Barun, Kiran! Your mother lives in a hut across the river. She is barely alive, passing her days in great misery. Go, bring her.'

The brothers and sister are amazed, then start crying, and then run and bring their mother.

A dozen fierce-looking policemen twirling their huge moustaches then go and grab the two wicked sisters, shave their heads, pour whey on them, seat them face backward on two lame donkeys and drive them out of the kingdom.

And then?

Then it's only joy and joy. For seven days and nights the subjects play, throwing diamonds and pearls at each other. Soon the king shifts his court to the beautiful palace of Arun, Barun and Kiran and starts ruling from there.

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Dhandhal, The King

I have enclosed here translation of a tribal narrative entitled 'Todal Raja' in the source language, and titled as 'Dhandhal, the King'.

The source text is taken from a work called *Bhil Lok Mahakavya: Rathor Varts* compiled and edited by Dr. Bhagvandas Patel, published by the editor 1992. The work basically is an oral epic.

Dhandhal was the sovereign ruler, O Dhandhaji,
He was the sovereign ruler.
He ruled over Gadh Gujhania....ra...ji...[1]

And Khensi was the ruler, O Khensi,
He was the ruler.
Kalu, the Khensi was the ruler of Jhayeria....ra...ji...

Jhayeria was struck by famine, O brother,
It was struck by famine.
Lack of rain left Jhayeria barren and parched.

Water had receded to the nether land, O brother,
Water had receded to the nether land.
Mothers cast aside their suckling.

(An accompanist: Can that ever happen?
The lead singer: Of course, such things happen in extreme times.)

1. indicates a refrain of a song. They appear at the end of each subsequent line, forming a similar pattern.

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Water became very scarce, O brother,
Water became very scarce.
The bottom of the granary was exposed.

The trees shed their leaves, O brother,
The trees shed their leaves.
No green could be seen.

People dropped like flies, O Khensi,
People dropped like flies.
O, it was such a calamity!

Everything was in plenty in Gujhania, O Khensi,
Everything was in plenty.
Gujhania was blessed with Nature's abundance.

Kalu set forth in the search of green pasture, O Kalu,
He set forth in the search of green pasture.
He looked for grazing ground.

He spotted grassy fields, O Kalu,
He spotted grassy fields.
Kalu came to the grassy fields.

O behold! Green pastures at last! O Kalu,
Behold the pastures are at sight.
His eyes beheld the land of Gujhania with delight.

Kalu took the way to Gujhania, O Kalu,
He took the way to Gujhania.
He arrived in Gadh Gujhania.

The king was seated in his court, O Rathor,
He was seated in his court.
Dhandhal, the king, was seated proudly and upright.

Courtly matters were being discussed, O Rathor,
Courtly matters were being discussed.
Kalu went towards the court in great speed.

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Kalu arrived in the court, O Khensi,
He arrived in the court.
He arrived in the court of Dhandhal, the king.

Kalu bowed and called out a greeting, O Khensi,
He bowed and called out a greeting.
He paid his respect to the court of Dhandhal, the king.

The Rathor king acknowledged his greetings, O Kalu,
He acknowledged his greetings.
He graciously accepted the greetings.

Kalu sat down on the tasselled rug, O Khensi,
He sat down on the tasselled rug.
He was seated on the tasselled rug.

Opium-drinks were served generously, O Rathor,
Opium-drinks were served generously.
The hookahs were filled with the best hemp.

Dhandhal said to his guest, O Rathor,
He said to his guest.
Kalu, listen to what I say.

Speak out your mind, O Kalu,
Speak out your mind.
Tell me what's on your mind.

Kalu replied with respect, O Khensi,
He replied with respect.
O king, listen to my tale of woe.

I am dismayed and distressed,
I'm dismayed and distressed.
I've come from a drought-stricken land.

A life of privation and misery we lead,
A life of privation and misery we lead.
We are facing death.

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Bhalai[2] *Jeevta!*[3]

... *(Tambur)*[4] *O maharaj!*[5] The Rathors ruled in Gadh Gujhania. *(Tambur)* The Khensis reigned over Jhayeria. Kalu tore the path, creating clouds of dust as he passed along. Jhayeria was stricken by terrible drought. Mothers forsook their suckling. Water became scarce and trees shed their leaves. Privation and misery prevailed. People dropped like flies. Many cows died for lack of pasture. Hope-bereft, death ridden air blew across the land. Kalu Khensi was perturbed. He pondered for a while. "How to keep the cattle alive? How to help the people survive? I must find a way out." He pondered and set out in a search of pasture. He arrived in Gadh Gujhania. Lo and behold! The pods of grain were tossing their heads. An expanse of *jhenjhvo* grass covered the land. A stretch of wild *bhogti* grass danced in a gentle breeze. Wherever his eyes fell, he saw God's plenty.

(Audience: There was no dearth of anything.) *(Tambur)*
Kalu Khensi went to Nalna Well, he visited Dipawali Tank and the pasture of Jhenjhania. Wherever he went, things were in abundance. He went straight to the court of Dhandhal, the king. Dhandhal sat amidst his courtiers. His counsellors and officials surrounded him. His traders and jesters, millers and vendors sat around him. How proudly and erect he sat! His chieftains talked about tales of bravery. Sumptuous steaks of goat meat were being served. The best of liquor was passed from hand to hand. The counsellors were discussing courtly matters. Opium drinks were served generously. The hookahs were filled with the best hemp. The Rathor king was in the best of spirits. Kalu Mhensi arrived at the scene. He went straight to the court. *Khama!*[6] *(Tambur)* He bowed and paid his respect to the

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2. literary meaning 'bravo', such expressions are used to encourage the singer/narrator.
3. the lead singer/narrator uses such expressions to encourage the accompanist and/or audience (a kind of rapport is created between the narrator and his audience through such words of encouragement.)
*** The entire narrative is interspersed with singing and prosaic narration. The prosaic version helps the lead singer to break the monotony; it as well as gives him a scope to elucidate the events and incidents further. The prose-verse is sung in a lilting style, to the accompaniment of the *tambur*, a stringed instrument.
4. Here, the word suggests the sound of plucking string of the *tambur*, plucked at regular intervals by the accompanist.
5. *maharaj* means a king or an honourable person; here it is used as an address meaning 'sir'.
6. Expressing the wish that the person addressed be hale and hearty.

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king. Dhandhal acknowledged his courtesy. Kalu took a seat on a tasselled rug. He was offered the hookah and the opium-drink. He became cool and composed. Then Dhandhal, the king, asked him the purpose of his visit. He told him to speak his mind. "No one gets anything unless he asks for it," said the king. Thus he prodded Kalu to speak. *(Tambur)* *Khama!*

O, *maharaj!* Thus spoke Kalu Khensi, "O, listen to what I say. Our Jhayeria is badly struck by famine. We are hope-bereft and distressed. Cows die in great numbers. People drop like flies. Mothers forsake their suckling and cows abandon their calves. It's difficult to survive. I've set out in search of pasture. I arrived in your land. The pastures here are greener than elsewhere. The bees hum merrily. The yellow-winged parrots sing sweetly. The koels coo happily throughout the day. The pasture of Jhejhania looks lush and green. This is God's plenty. We seek safety in your land. We seek refuge for a couple of years. Help me to keep my people alive. See that our cattle survive." Thus spoke Kalu, the Khensi, and Dhandhal, the king, listened intently. He spoke generously, "O Kalu, you are welcome to my land. Bring in herds of hundreds of cattle. Graze them in the pasture of Jhenjhania. Let them quench their thirst at Dipawali Tank. Your cows must not die. Your people must survive. Go back and bring them straight to my pasture." *(khama!)*

(Tambur) O, *maharaj*! Dhandhal, the king offered shelter to the distressed. Kalu Khensi was delighted. He departed happily. "The Rathor has helped me survive, otherwise my people would have died. But now, life looks brighter. To the green pasture of Gujhania, the herds of hundreds of cows I'll drive. I'll graze them in the pasture of Jhenjhania and let them quench their thirst at Dipawali Tank. Certainly my people will survive." May you be well, O *honkaria.*[7] Life is short but the tale never ends.[8]

Kalu journeyed homeward,
He journeyed homeward.
He set out for his homeland with hasty steps.

Kalu arrived in Jhayeria
He arrived in Jhayeria.
He reached Jhayeria as fast as he could.

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7. One of the accompanists, who responds to the lead singer at intervals.
8. This is a sort of formulaic expression that appears at intervals.

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Kalu addressed his people,
He addressed his people.
O chieftains! Listen to what I say.

O my sons, I implore you to listen to me,
I implore you to listen to me.
Listen to what I say.

Jhendro and Mendro, the pair of sons,
Jhendro and Mendro.
They were the sons of Kalu.

I have been to a place where everything is in abundance,
Where everything is in abundance.
The place was blessed with God's plenty.

Kalu spoke with hope and enthusiasm.
He spoke with hope and enthusiasm.
O chieftains, listen to what I say.

Gather round the cattle,
Gather round the cattle.
Gather round the herds of your cattle.

Load your belongings on bullocks,
Load your belongings on bullocks.
We'll set off immediately.

People moved swiftly,
They moved swiftly.
They hurried to depart their homeland.

The Khensis set forth on a journey,
They set forth on a journey.
Clouds of dust rose as they trod along.

The Khensis arrived at Gujhania,
They arrived at Gujhania.
They arrived in Gadh Gujhania.

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Soon the pasture of Jhenjhania was in sight,
The pasture of Jhenjhania was in sight.
They settled down in Jhenjhania.

At the outskirts of the town,
At the outskirts of the town.
They settled down at the outskirts of the town.

Nature was in abundance,
Nature was in abundance.
They grazed their cattle with relief.

In the pasture of Jhenjhania,
In the pasture of Jhenjhania.
The Khensis grazed their cows in the pasture of Jhenjhania.

(Tambur) O, Kalu Khensi rushed back to Jhayeria. He talked to his chieftains, "O brothers, we are drought-stricken, but Gujhania is blessed with God's plenty. The Rathors of Gujhania will kindly take us in. May you be well, O *honkaria.* Time flies by but the tale goes on. Kalu Khensi stayed in. Gujhania for a year; until the month of *Jeth* set in. Jhayeria had received good rain. Kalu decided to go back to his land. He returned to his land with hundreds of cows." May you be well, O *honkara.* Life is short but the tale never ends.

Translated from Dungri Bhili dialect by Nila Shah ❑

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Are These the Marks of Blows?

This is the translation of the Kannada folk-song, "*Guddina Gayavenu*" taken from the book on Kannada Folksong collection, *Janapada Geetegalu* (1998) Ed. N. Prabha. Published by Ankita Pustaka, Bangalore, 2005.

The present poem is a Kannada folk-song generally sung during marriages. This song reveals Rukmini's character; she is sure about her husband's infidelity, yet asks him to accept the fact that he had visited the other 'queen' the night before. She does not buy any excuses Krishna makes.

Rukmini: Oh how I trusted you, sweet Krishna to be true,
Tell me, my Lord, are not all these marks of blows?

Krishna: I fell while mounting an enamoured elephant,
Listen lovely lass; these are all but blemishes from the fall.

Rukmini: Scratches by nails, numerous scratches by nails,
Are these scratches not by fingernails?
Tell me, my Lord, were you not by a woman clawed?

Krishna: I slipped and was scarred while plucking the orchard lemons.
Listen lovely lass, these are all but scars by that fall.

Rukmini: The robe lined with gold, the bejewelled royal robe,
How was it creased?
Tell me, my Lord, how was it creased?

Krishna: At the ring, while wrestling I wrinkled the royal robe,
Listen lovely lass, the robes were wrinkled at the ring.

Rukmini: Last night I had laden luxuries on our marriage bed.
Where did you flee?
Tell me, my Lord, where did you flee?

Krishna: To get rid of the summer sweat, I went for a stroll,
Listen lovely lass, I was just strolling nearby.
Your doubts persist whatever I insist;
At the pious shrine of Kashi Vishwanatha,

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Listen lovely lass; let me the coal-test pass.
I will proclaim with coals on my hand aflame.

Rukmini: With the coal burning in your palms,
You may go where your whore charms,
Tell me, my Lord, did you not go to the chamber of your queen?

Krishna: At the shrine of Kashi Vishwanatha,
Let the snake entwine my neck,
Listen lovely lass; let me the snake-test pass.

Rukmini: The snake may entwine your neck,
As vices entangle your heart.
Did you not, my Lord, go to that whore's abode?
Listen Oh Lord; did you not visit the queen's abode?
Neither could I throw, nor hold I,
The scalding ghee in my palm.
Listen Oh Lord, I am trapped in a deal I cannot afford.
Listen My Lord, this deal I cannot afford.

Translated from Kannada by Shweta Rao

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And Destiny Was Defeated

Once there was a young Brahmin who was in the pursuit of knowledge. He had heard about a wise rishi (ascetic) living in a dense forest far away from the madness of this world. The young Brahmin went in search of this learned rishi. He walked for many days braving thorny bushes and dangerous wild beasts. At last he reached the *kutiya* (hut) of the rishi situated on the bank of a river. The old rishi was happy with the young Brahmin who had come seeking knowledge and accepted him as his pupil. The young man now started living with the rishi and his wife. He served them whole-heartedly, helping them in their daily chores. In his free time he learnt as much as he could from his guru.

After some time the old rishi's wife was in the family way. A few weeks before her delivery, the rishi decided to go on a pilgrimage. As the rishi's wife couldn't accompany him at this critical stage, the guru entrusted the care of his wife to his young pupil and the wife of another rishi residing in his neighbourhood.

Soon the time of delivery came; the guru's wife was in labour and the wife of the neighbouring rishi was in the hut to help her with the delivery. The worried pupil was pacing up and down outside the hut praying to God for the well-being of his guru's wife and the expected baby.

Lord Brahma now arrived to write the destiny of the child. It is impossible for ordinary mortals to see Brahma but the young Brahmin had acquired wisdom and special accomplishments from his guru which enabled him to see a man clad in ordinary robes moving towards his guru's hut. He cried out in anger, "Hey, stop. Don't move." Brahma was astonished. Till now no one had ever seen him nor interfered in his work. The pupil said, "Hey old Brahmin, where are you going? Don't you know the guru's wife is about to deliver a baby? You can't go in."

Brahma hesitatingly told him who he was and the purpose of his visit. On hearing this, the pupil bowed before him and begged for forgiveness. As Brahma had very little time left he wanted to go inside

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immediately but the pupil was adamant that unless he told him about the destiny he was going to inscribe on the forehead of the baby, he wouldn't be allowed to go in. Brahma said, "Son, even I don't know what my pen will write on the forehead of the baby. Destiny's inscription is decided by the deeds performed in his previous incarnations. Don't waste my time, let me go in." The pupil agreed on one condition that Brahma would reveal the destiny of the new born baby after having written it.

Brahma said, "Very well," and entered the hut. After a few moments he came out. The pupil asked him, "Sir what did your pen write on the forehead of the child?" Brahma said, "I'll tell you son, but remember if you tell this secret to any one, your head will break into a thousand pieces. Your guru's wife has been blessed with a son but he will be very poor throughout his life. He will own nothing except a buffalo and a bag of paddy; and with this he will have to earn his livelihood."

The pupil exclaimed, "What? Such a miserable destiny for the son of such a great rishi?" Brahma said, "I can do nothing. This is the fruit of the deeds in his past lives, the consequences of which he has to face now. But do not forget my warning." Saying this, Brahma vanished.

The pupil stood rock-still. He thought of the miserable days awaiting the child and he felt guilty that he couldn't even tell this to any one. Soon the guru returned from his pilgrimage. He was happy to see his wife and child. In the intimate fellowship of his learned guru, the pupil's sorrow soon disappeared.

While the young man was engrossed in his studies, three years flew by. The rishi's wife was in the family way once again. This time the old rishi decided to go on a pilgrimage to the source of the holy river Tungabhadra. Again he entrusted his wife to the care of his pupil and the wife of the neighbouring rishi.

Once again Brahma came when it was time for the baby's birth. The pupil was waiting for him. Brahma had to stop and promise the pupil to tell him the fate of the child with the precondition that if he disclosed this information to anyone his head would break into a thousand pieces. Before departing, Brahma informed him that this time it was a daughter. "For her my pen has written that prostitution will be her destiny and every night she will have to sell her body." Saying this, Brahma vanished. The pupil was grieved to know that the daughter of the holy rishi would be a prostitute. He was in agony for a long time due to this but at last he consoled himself that everybody has a destiny which regulates his life.

After some time the rishi returned from his journey. The pupil

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continued to stay for two more years after which he decided to go to the Himalayas. By this time the rishi's son was five years old and the daughter was three. Whenever the pupil saw them his heart would fill with sorrow for the miserable destiny awaiting them. But he continued to console himself with the thought that none could escape their destiny.

Seeking his guru's permission he left their family and headed for the Himalayas. He visited many cities and came across many ascetics with whom he lived and learned. For twenty years he wandered around trying to understand the world and human behaviour. One day he decided to visit his guru's ashram where his quest for learning had begun.

When he reached the guru's hut, he came to know that the guru and his wife had passed away. With deep sorrow in his heart he went to the nearby city to find out the whereabouts of the guru's children. Very soon he saw a poor man in tattered clothes with a buffalo. He immediately guessed him to be the son of his guru. The cruel fate, which Brahma had written, had finally come true.

He followed him to his thatched hut where he was living with his wife and two emaciated children. They had nothing in the hut except a bag of paddy. Everyday the worried lady of the house would take some paddy, thresh and cook it for the family. When the sack was empty they would buy another one with whatever money they had saved. The pupil called the man by his name and asked him, "Do you recognize me?" The guru's son was astonished and perplexed as to who he was and so the pupil revealed his identity to him. By now the pupil had matured and started looking like a saint and the guru's son was duly impressed. The pupil said, "Son, please do as I say. Tomorrow morning, take the buffalo and bag of paddy to the local market and sell them at whatever cost you get. With the money you get, buy provisions for a feast and don't save any money. Donate some to the worthy Brahmins of the city also. I'm your father's pupil and whatever I tell you is for your well-being. Have faith in me and you'll never have cause to repent."

The guru's son was not convinced and said, "If I sell all I have tomorrow, how will I feed my family? You brahmins keep telling poor people like us to donate all we have. You don't lose anything as a share of it comes to you, eventually." But his wife said, "Your father was his guru. He appears to be a holy man. Certainly he knows something which we don't know. Let's follow his advice for a day at least."

The guru's son agreed when his wife convinced him. Next day, though he was worried, he sold his buffalo and the bag of paddy. With the money he got, he purchased provisions sufficient for his family and to feed fifty Brahmins two meals. After the feast, he couldn't sleep. The

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pupil was also sleeping outside their thatched hut. The guru's son got up at midnight and came out. The pupil also woke up. The guru's son said to him, "Sir whatever you said, I have done. After some time it will be yet another day, what will I feed my wife and children with? I have no paddy and no buffalo left." The pupil showed him a purse and told him that it had enough money to buy a buffalo and a bag of paddy.

He told him to go to sleep without worrying and see what would happen in the morning. The guru's son had nightmares and couldn't sleep. He got up before daybreak and while washing his face he looked towards the worn out thatched shelter where he used to tie his buffalo. In the morning, after he got up his first job had been to feed his buffalo. He thought, "Today there is no buffalo and so no fodder to be given." But he was surprised to see a buffalo tied there. He couldn't believe his eyes. He thought he was dreaming. He went inside and came out with a lamp. He saw that truly there was a buffalo tied under the thatched shelter and a bag of paddy was lying nearby. His happiness knew no bounds. He went running to the pupil to tell him about this. The pupil said, "Young man, there is nothing to be happy about it. Sell the buffalo and paddy in the market and give a good feast to your family and the Brahmins."

Today, without giving a second thought the guru's son sold the buffalo and paddy. He then gave a grand feast to his family and 50 noble Brahmins and didn't save a single penny. This went on for a month and the pupil was now convinced that this practice had become a permanent reality in the life of his guru's son. He and his family would now live well. One day he said to his guru's son, "When I saw your life full of misery I had to do something. Whatever I could do, I have done. Now you are happy. Continue to do what you are doing. Don't save a single penny for tomorrow. If you save anything, evil days will fall upon you again and your good fortune will desert you."

The rishi's son had witnessed his good fortune and touched it with his bare hands. He expressed gratefulness to his father's pupil and promised that he would follow his instructions word for word. The pupil said, "Now I shall leave. I have to emancipate someone else also. Where is your sister? When I left she was three years old. Let me see how she is getting along in life."

Hearing about his sister, his eyes filled with tears. He said, "Don't talk of her. She's as good as dead for us. I feel ashamed of her. I don't want to think about her in this hour of happiness. "But the pupil remembered very well what Brahma's pen had written on her forehead.

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He said, "It doesn't matter, just tell me where she is. He said in a broken voice "She lives in a nearby village working as a prostitute".

The pupil blessed the guru's son and his family and took leave of them. Now he wanted to do something for his guru's daughter. He went to the village where she lived. He reached her house at dusk and knocked at her door. In her profession nobody knocks at the door twice. She opened the door and was amazed to see a saint *(sanyasi)* at the door. "Do you recognize me" he asked. But she couldn't recollect. He introduced himself. Knowing that he was her father's pupil, she started weeping bitterly. Today, once again she remembered that she was the daughter of a great rishi and began weeping terribly. She fell at the feet of the saint and in a voice choked with sadness told him that hunger and poverty had led her to this sinful profession. Consoling her the saint said, "Daughter, it breaks my heart to see how life's struggles have driven you to the path of unrighteousness but you can still be liberated from this way of life. You may lead a different life altogether if you do what I say. Tonight you open the door only for those who gift you a jar full of real pearls. Try this tonight. I shall come tomorrow morning."

She hated her way of life. Thus, although she had doubts, she accepted what the saint said. She closed the door from within. When clients knocked at her door, she said her rates had increased and now she would accept nothing less than a jar full of real pearls. Her clients thinking that she had gone mad, turned away.

With the passing of the night she began to worry. Who was there in the village to give her a jar full of pearls?

But how could Brahma's forecast be untrue? With three-fourths of the night gone and no client in sight, Brahma incarnated himself as a young man and went to her house with a jar full of real pearls to become her lover.

In the morning he went away. The rishi's daughter told the saint that a glorious young man had come with a jar full of pearls to spend the night with her. The saint knew that his advice had not gone waste. He said, "From today you are one of the most blessed ladies. There are only a very few people in this world who would pay such a great price for spending a night with you. Therefore, the man who came with the jar of pearls will come to you every night. He will be your sole lover and husband. No one else will be able to even touch you. You just keep doing whatever I tell you to do. Every morning you sell the pearls and feed the poor with the money you get. Don't save any money or grain for tomorrow. Spend everything by the evening. The day you

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save anything, you will lose your husband and your sinful, miserable life will return. Will you be able to do it?"

The rishi's daughter agreed at once. The saint began living under a tree near her house to see whether his plan would work or not. He was happy to see its successful outcome.

After being satisfied with the new turn in the life of his guru's children, he sought permission to leave and decided to go on a pilgrimage.

He got up before daybreak on the day he was to depart. It was a moon-lit night and hearing the cawing of the crows he thought dawn had broken. So he got up and started on his journey. After travelling some distance he came across a man who was holding a rope tied to the neck of a buffalo. He had a sack of paddy on his head and a bag full of pearls slung on his shoulder.

The saint asked him, "Sir, who are you and where are you going?" Hearing this, the man put the sack of paddy on the ground and nearly weeping said, "I have lost all my hair carrying this sack of paddy everyday to the house of your guru's son. This buffalo is also for him. After this I'll have to change my appearance to go and visit his daughter with a jar of pearls. A wily man like you overturned whatever destiny I wrote on their forehead. I will now have to fulfill the vow that I made at the time of their birth. When are you going to release me from this daily grind?" saying this, he began to weep. This was none other than the writer of people's destinies, Brahma himself.

The saint said, "Until you bestow them with a simple and happy life." Brahma agreed and thus put an end to his own misery.

Thus, Destiny and Brahma were eventually defeated.

Translated from Hindi by A.K. Srivastava ❑

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The Story of Gopal the King

The Rajbansis are the natives of North Bengal, (generally known as the Bahes). The Rajbansis were happy with their peasant economy in the olden days, the life with the rice and cattle around was easy, and this gave rise to a variety of folk culture-songs, dramas, dances and storytelling. They have no script. So what, they have is a rich heritage of oral literature. Their dialect is close to mainstream Bengali speech. One of their genres of Oral literature. Their dialect is close to mainstream Bengali speech. One of *Kissa, Kircha, Kahhani, Solok, Fasti, Galpa or Gappo*. Specially in the regions of Malda, Uttar and Dakhsin Dinajpur, and Rajsahi (now in Bangladesh) in the month of *Bhadra* (August-September) from the first day of the month till the last, story-telling sessions were arranged by some well-to-do farmer in his courtyard or barn. After dinner the story-teller or *kathak* started telling a story which went on past midnight.

I have attempted to translate one such story-*Gopal Rajar Galpo* (The Story of Gopal the King). It was published in a special edition of the *Little Magazine Baitanik* (*Uttar Banger Luptapray Lokosanskriti*) in 2004, and it was written down by Puspajit Roy (Ramkrishna Pally/Sabuj Abuj/Malda/Ph-03512-284036). The magazine is published from Siliguri (23 Lala Lajpat Roy Road, Ashrampara, Siliguri-1 Darjeeling, West Bengal.)

–The Translator

Once upon a time there was a king.His name was Kripadhon. He was a miser. He was also very cruel. He extorted money from his subjects as taxes. Unable to bear his torture, the poor peasants of his kingdom began to leave his country. Then one day God thought that He must put a stop to this. If people went away like that in hordes what will happen to the kingdom? It will turn into a desert. To teach the king a lesson, God disguised himself as a monk and left a letter in the king's court in the shadow of the evening. No one saw him. In the morning the king found the letter and opened it.

In the letter it was written "Send your six sons to trade in far away lands. If you don't, your country will be in great danger." The king had seven sons. The youngest was called Gopal. Afraid of some

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peril that might fall upon his kingdom if he didn't obey the instruction, the king sent his elder six sons in boats laden with merchandise to trade in far away lands.

Days passed by but his sons didn't return; neither did they send any news. The queen grew pale and thin with anxiety thinking of her sons. A river flowed by the king's palace. Its water was cool and clear as crystal. There was a flight of steps that went down into the water. One afternoon the queen had gone there to bathe. As she stepped into the water she remembered that her sons had sailed away in their boats from that *ghat.* She felt very sad and sitting down on one of the stony steps she began to cry. She wept and said, "Twelve boats and my six sons/Have sailed away, sailed away/Bring me their news mother Ganges/ Let me hear from them." The river goddess Ganges felt sorry for the queen. ln a soft voice she sang: "Don't cry queen, don't cry anymore/ I'll find out where your sons have gone to/I'll bring you news from them/Don't cry and wipe away your tears." The queen stopped crying and as she took a dip, her feet touched something hard and by its rough and woody feel she was certain that it was a boat. She hastily came back to the palace and asked the king "O king is anything of yours lying in the water?' The king remembered that long ago he had a boat which was lying in the river. He took his servants and went to the riverside. The servants tried hard to pull out the boat but they could not move it an inch. Then the king brought two of his elephants and tied a rope to the boat and made them pull it. Still it didn't budge. The king ordered one of his men to go and call Kanakdar *majhi.* As soon as Kanakdar *majhi* came and touched the boat, it bobbed up and floated on the river. The king decided to set sail in that boat with Kanakdar *majhi* at the helm, in search of his lost six sons. The king's youngest son Gopal also wanted to go with them; so the king took him in the boat.

After sailing for seven days and seven nights they came to a river island. A row of beautiful birds were sitting on a green patch of land. Gopal had seen them, and he wanted one for him to keep as a pet. The king told Kanakdar *majhi* to try and catch a bird for his son. Kanakdiar *majhi* set down a trap and caught one bird which he gave to Gopal.

The king's six sons had drowned in the river but no one knew about it.Their boats had capsized and the king saw the twelve boats of his sons lying broken on the shore of the island, shattered into bits and he understood that they had all died. Sad and broken-hearted, he ordered his helmsman to row back towards his palace, and they came back with the bird.

In the palace Gopal kept the bird in a golden cage and gave him

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food to eat from the king's plate. But the bird did not eat anything. Then Gopal gave him butter and candies but the bird did not even peck at them. Finally Gopal brought him grapes and pomegranate seeds and decided to force-feed the bird. Now the bird told Gopal that he won't eat any of the food. What would he eat then?- Gopal asked the bird. "I only eat fruits of pearls growing on glittering diamond trees," the bird replied. Where could he get those fruits?-Gopal asked the bird. "In my own country. If I don't get to eat them I'll die!" the bird said. "How can we get there?" Gopal asked. "Get up on my back, and I'll fly with you there," the bird said. So Gopal and the bird flew to a strange land where pearl fruits grow on diamond trees.

The bird's name was Kundal. After staying for a long time in the bird's country, Gopal felt very homesick. He wanted to come back to the palace. "I want to see my father and mother. They must be very lonely without me. Carry me Kundal back home," he told the bird. So the bird told Gopal to sit on his back and he flew towards the palace.

After flying for a few days and nights the bird felt tired and weary. He could fly no more and fell down into a garden of beautiful flowers. The garden belonged to an old woman who used to gather freshly bloomed flowerbuds in the evening. That evening when she came into the garden and saw Gopal she was amazed. "What a handsome boy!" she thought. She took Gopal with her to her own cottage.

The old woman used to make garlands with the flowers from her garden and take them to the king's palace. One day Gopal told her,"You use thread to weave the flowers into a garland, but I'll make you a garland without any threads." He took some fresh flowers and knitted them into a beautiful garland without threading them. The old woman carried the garland to the palace and it fell into the hands of the princess. "What a beautiful garland! Who has woven it?" she asked. The old woman told a lie. "Its my sister's daughter, who is staying with me. She has woven this beautiful garland." "Bring her to the palace tomorrow morning! I want to see her," the princess said. The old woman was in a fix. "What am I to do now?" she thought. When she told Gopal he agreed to come to the palace in the guise of a woman. Wearing a blue sari and some silver jewellery which the old woman had kept in a box since her younger days, Gopal came before the princess.The name of the princess was Dulba or Durba. She liked Gopal whom she thought to be a young woman of her own age and urged the old woman to let her stay back in the palace. The old woman couldn't tell the truth now and she went away leaving Gopal with the princess. At night while lying together in her bed, the princess found out that Gopal was a man and not a young

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woman as she had thought him to be. They both fell in love with one another and began spending their nights together as man and wife.

After some seven or eight months had passed, the news reached the king that the princess was big with child. The king was very, very angry. He told his men to find out who was sleeping with his daughter. To catch the thief the king's men coloured the walls and floors of the princess's room with orange vermillion. At night when Gopal came to the princess's room as was his wont, his shirt got smeared with vermillion from the wall. After midnight when Gopal was about to leave, the princess saw the smudge on Gopal's shirt in the light of her lamp. She looked around herself and saw the vermillion on the walls. "Oh woebegone!" she cried. "The king, my father will kill you. Send your shirt to the washerman as soon as you reach home and tell him to wash the shirt before the first cock crows at dawn." Gopal did as he was told. He sent his shirt to the washerman and told him to wash it before the night ends.

In the morning the king saw that someone was in his daughter's room at night. There were footprints all over the palace. He sent his soldiers to catch the thief. They went and brought the washerman because they found that his shirt had smears of vermillion on it. Trembling with fear he cried, that it was not he who came to the princess's room at night. "I was feeling cold in the morning, so I had worn a shirt, which was given to me to launder at night," he said. "Whose shirt is it, that you are wearing then?" the king asked. The washerman replied that it was Gopal's who lived in the cottage of the old woman who brought flowers to the king's palace. The king's men went and brought Gopal before the king. The king ordered his soldiers to take Gopal to the temple of goddess Chandi and sever his head from the body. The soldiers took Gopal into the deep forest. Just when one of them was about to cut off his head Gopal told him, "Please grant me my last wish, and then kill me." "What is it?" he asked. Gopal said "I want to see the blue sky for the last time before I die. Let me climb up a tree, while you stand guard around it. I will come down after looking at the sky." "Let's grant him his last wish," the soldiers decided and they allowed him to climb up a tall mango tree, which had a crown of dense green leaves. When Gopal reached the topmost branch of the tree, he cried out in a loud voice "This king has no mercy,/This king has no pity/Kundal go and tell my mother. I am dying before my time /I am dying young." Hearing his cry Kundal came and taking Gopal on his back flew away with him. The king's soldiers waited for Gopal for a long time but were surprised when Gopal didn't come down. One of them climbed the

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tree but came down and said that Gopal was not on the tree. He had vanished. They searched for him here and there, and then went back to the king with the news that Gopal had disappeared. The king again sent his men all over the land to find Gopal.

In the meantime the princess had given birth to a son. The bird Kundal told Gopal that it was no more safe to stay in that land. It would be better if he took his wife and son and flew back to his father's kingdom. So one night Gopal, Dulba and their son sat on the bird's back and began their flight. For nine months the bird flew during which time the princess became pregnant for the second time. So the bird came down to a small island in the midst of a river where Dulba gave birth to a second son. She needed fire for the ritual of purification after childbirth, so Gopal told her to stay near the children while he went in search of fire to the faraway viliage. Dulba had named her first son Amol and the second Dulal. She told her elder son to keep a watch over his newborn brother while she went to wash her clothes in the river.

She had finished washing her clothes when she spotted a big barge coming towards her. A rich merchant was in the barge. He was coming back home after trading for years in faraway lands. He had seen Dulba from far and was charmed by her beauty. When the barge drew nearer Dulba saw him standing on the deck and asked him for some fire. "Come to my barge and take the fire," he said. As Dulba stepped on the barge the merchant signalled his men to row faster and the barge sailed away swiftly, taking Dulba farther and farther away from the island. Dulba realized how she was cheated and was about to jump into the river when the merchant came and caught her in his arms. "Be my wife." he said. "You will have to wait for twelve years, before I marry you, the princess told him. "Twelve years will, pass in the twinkling of an eye," he replied and agreed to wait for that time.

Gopal on his part got caught in another trap. He had entered a palace to ask for some fire. The king of that country had died young, and his widowed queen saw Gopal and fell in love with him. She lured him into the inner recesses of the palace and charmed him by her wiles. He went on staying with the queen and became the king of the land.

The two poor children, Amol and Dulal, found themselves abandoned and began to cry. A cowherd who brought his cattle to graze on that island heard their cry and came to them. He gave them milk to drink, took them to his own cottage and brought them up as his own children.

One day Gopal and his new queen decided to give a banquet to celebrate their marriage. Gopal wanted that all the foreign merchants

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who passed by in their merchant ships should also come to his feast. But who would sit by the river all day long to tell them about the king's order? One of his men told him that the cowherd's two sons were fit for that task, and it was decided that Amol and Dulal would sit by the river and tell the merchants about the king's banquet.

On the day of the banquet, the two brothers were sitting by the river. At noontide a big barge was sailing by, when the boys called the merchant who was in the barge and told him to go to the king's banquet. Before going the merchant told the boys: "I have precious merchandise in my barge, so keep a good watch over it."

The younger boy Dulal told his brother Amol to tell a story to while away the time. Amol told him the story of his own life: "Our father went to bring fire in the far away village/But he didn't return. The tiger of the forest caught and ate him./Our mother went to the riverside to wash clothes/She didn't come back. A crocodile took her away deep into the river./Our father's name was Gopal. Our mother was called Dulba./They were a prince and a princess. As it happened, it was Dulba, their mother who was sitting inside the barge. She heard her son telling the story which she knew so well, and started weeping. Soon the merchant returned and finding her in tears asked her what made her cry. "It was those two boys," Dulba said "they were peeping into the barge and calling me names when you were away. I want the king to judge and punish them."

The merchant was very angry with the boys and took them to the king and told him "O king, these two boys, who were your messengers, abused my wife. It was on your invitation I came to the banquet leaving her in their charge. I want justice to be done" The king said "Bring your wife to the court tomorrow and I will hear from her what was it that these boys have said."

In the morning the merchant took Dulba and the two boys to the king's court. The king was on the throne in all his regal splendour. First the king asked the boys "Why did you call this merchant's wife names?" Amol replied that they didn't say anything to anybody. It was only the story of their own lives that he was telling his brother. The king told him to tell that story once again, and Amol repeated what he had sung by the riverside to his brother. When he had finished, Dulba told the king that these two boys were her sons and the wicked merchant had kept her captive by force.

It dawned on the king that these were his own wife and children. Dulba too recognized her husband. The family was reunited and the

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wicked merchant was thrown into the prison. His merchandise was confiscated. There was peace and plenty during Gopal's reign.

Postscript : The king Gopala of the story is most probably, 'Gopala' who was the founder of the Pala dynasty in Bengal and reigned in the middle of the eighth century(750-770). In the districts of Uttar and Dakhsin Dinajpur, Malda, in West Bengal, and Rajshahi in Bangladesh, there are many stories about this king Gopala.

Translated from Bengali by Joysree Das

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Tuntuni and the King

This is one of the folk tales of Bengal, compiled by Upendra Kishore Roychoudhury (1863-1915) in *Tuntunir Boi* (1910). His work, in prose form, has already been translated in English. Here, the story has been presented in verse form. The contribution of Upendra Kishore, his son Sukumar Roy and grand-son Satyajit Ray have enriched the Bengali juvenile literature immensely.

Once, Tuntuni, a tiny tailor bird,
Built her nest in the royal yard,
Where the king's armed watchmen,
Dried King's coins, all golden.
Once the watchmen by mistake,
Left a coin for Tuntuni to partake.
Tuni thought, "Oh, what a thing!
I have wealth just as the king."
She started trilling loud and clear,
"My nest matches the king's coffer."
One day the king heard her boast;
Got amused and surprised most.
He asked his men to check the nest
And find the riches of his avian guest.
They reported, "She is stinking rich;
A gold coin with droppings in her niche!"
The king ordered to get it back,
And it returned to the royal sack.
Tuntuni sang a most mournful lay,
"The miserly king took Tuni's coin away."
The king laughed, "What a nagging bird!"
"Return the coin" he told the guard.
Then, she sang "King fears Tuntuni;
So he returned the golden guinea!"
The angry king roared, "Catch her,

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A king must such a bird devour!
Poor Tuntuni was brought in snare,
To the seven queens to take care.
The queens held the bird, each in turn;
They never had had such a fun.
All on a sudden the bird escaped,
Leaving them aghast and afraid.
It was then they suddenly found,
A frog leaping on the ground.
Toad tandoori was served to the king.
And he exclaimed, "What a thing!"
Just then from the gulmohar tree,
Tuntuni chirped, "Hi, hello, see!
Here I dance and wings I flutter,
As the king eats frog from the gutter."
king heard her gibe and spat out,
All seven queens lost their snout.
Tuni teased from her bed of roses
"Seven queens minus their noses!"
Blind with anger, the king declared,
"The bird must now be truly weird!
This time I shall gobble it alive,
In my tummy it'll sing and thrive."
To pre-empt Tuni's escape again,
Were posted forty swordsmen,
Who would chop the bird if need be,
While king gulped the tiny Tuntuni.
He tried to push it down his throat
With lots of water, which made it float
And escape out of his oral well,
As the king vomited like a gargoyle.
Swords were flung; one such blow,
Left the royal nose on the floor.
Tuntuni, thereafter, never was seen,
By the humbled, noseless king.

Translated from Bengali by Shyamal Chakrabarti ❑

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Extract from Tamil Oral Literature
Mukkoodal Pallu

Mukkodal Palli

With a *thilak* of turmeric paste on her forehead
And holy ash smeared above it,
With the loosely-knit black hair
parted into two halves,
With a fitting iron bracelet,
With betel-leaves in her hand
And chewing betel-nut in her mouth,
With her lips gently opening
Every time a folded betel-leaf passes in;
With the nipples of her two breasts—
Erect and pointing to the powerful black eyes—
Attaining the blackness of these eyes;
With the fitting breasts drooping a little
To avoid the blackness spreading further;
With golden silk adorning the slender waist
Appeared the elder 'Palli' of Mukkoodal on the stage.

Maruthur Palli

With Cochin turmeric-paste beautifully smeared over her rosy feet,
With the tender green leaves, she wore, giving out fragrance,
The crescent moon-like small forehead glowing
With the holy ash smeared on it,
With the eyes adorned with collyrium
Bouncing here and there like a small fish ('kendai')

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Brightening the knotted hair on the sides
And the ornaments of the ears;
With the large alluring breasts moving
Like the tusks of a spirited elephant;
With the *thaali* bound with the chain
Of blue diamond glittering;
With the silk, adorning her vanchi creeper-like waist,
Blooming with its five colours beautifully
The 'Palli' of Maruthur appeared on the stage.

The Arrival of Pallan

With a mustache twisted like
The horn of an irritable male sheep,
And the cheeks appearing beautiful
With the whiskers artistically cut with scissors,
With the sash tightly tied around the waist
Along with the weapon *vazhuthadi*,
With the head-dress spotted with gold,
With the blue knotted hair,
Bouncing while stumbling and slipping
Nodding the head if pricked by something
Waving the stick and belching
While stepping forward slowly
Laughing without cause in drunken frenzy
Appeared the handsome *kutumban* on the stage

Pallan Says About His Greatness

I'll plough the heart-
Considering it as a sterile land—
Of those who never think of
The unique lotus-like feet of Lord Alagar;
I'll cut the ears of those who never learn from our chieftain
The literary truth of valuable books,
Just as I clear the bushes in barren land;
I'll fasten the devilish feet —
To the plough with a strong rope—

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Of those who don't go round the God 'Perumal',
Chanting his hundred and eight holy hymns;
I'll treat those, who don't study *Thiruvai Mozhi*,
As two-legged bulls and chastise them
And beat them with a cudgel.

Translated from Tamil by V. Ayothi

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Riddles

Kui is the dialect mainly spoken in Kandhamal and some adjoining districts of Orissa.Kondhs, the largest tribe of Orissa speak the language along with other people.

Kui has no script of its own. Earlier British Administrators, researchers and missionaries used to write Kui in English alphabet. Some also used Oriya script. But, both of the alphabets are not fully equipped to write the typical pronunciation of Kui language.

Kui has a wealth of oral literature. Major literary forms are stories, songs, knowledge of plants and animals, ritual songs, riddles and planting couplets etc. As the oral literature is yet to be documented, it is quite difficult to find a text of Kui traditional literature. Under the category of oral literature, some riddles are translated for the purpose of this competition. Shri Raghunath Rath, a retired Revenue official and author, has taken pain in collecting Kui riddles and also has published his collection under title *Kui Dhogdhomali*. In Kui the riddles are called as "Bakedi" or "Bakeni". The Serial No. of the riddles as in the original text are mentioned in the second column of the translation sheet. Last two riddles are not in the text. However, they are included to indicate that still a large number of riddles in Kui language are yet to be collected and documented.

A tick on the elephant's hip unless it yawns, jumbo can't beep.

Ans.- Lock of the house.

Little policemen, red turb on their heads, camp in every house. One gets up, when you call.

Ans.- Match Box.

It ne'er changes its place, yet, travels across the horizons.

Ans.- Eyes.

It goes shining from home, but comes back with dirt.

Ans.- Axe.

It goes out with empty stomach, but returns with its belly full.

Ans.- Pot for fetching water.

White little children make a wall, can you climb it, without a fall ?

Ans.- White ants making ant hill.

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Fair little damsel with a slim waist line, garments she wears, above ninetynine.

Ans.- Trunk of a banana tree.

Baby starts crying when you take it in your arms, leave it on ground, sleeps in silence.

Ans.- Cattle Dong bell.

So you cut, so it grows.

Ans.-Hair.

A pair of cows go in a row, the black on leads, red one does follow.

Ans.-Fruit of Semiscarpus Anacardium.

An old man with hunch back, rounds over the paddy fields.

Ans.- Hand spade

A child born with grey hair.

Ans.- Maize.

Two buttocks upon a single leg,

Ans.- Siali (Bauhinia Vahili) leaves.

A child rolls on mother's chest.

Ans.- Mortar of stone spice grinder.

There are ropes filled inside the drum.

Ans.- Intestines of a human being.

Neither by kick, nor by a whip, just put you a step,to make it hop.

Ans.- Leg pound (Dhenki)

Two little brothers so quarrelsome, beat each other, till they sleep.

Ans.- Eye lids.

Ten littlemen out on a hunt, only two hunt, rest beat the bush.

Ans. Search and killing of louse by pressing between two thumb nails.

Dry hard wood at the bottom, with a stream at the top.

Ans. - Sago palm tree.

It never softens when you boil, just bake in fire, you can't take it out.

Ans.-Hair.

An old lady looks so dark, is an expert in making parched rice.

Ans.- A kendu wood with blackbark. It makes sparkling sound when put into fire.

An old man, sitting with an umbrella on.

Ans.-Mushroom.

Hairy mother, bald child, bald mother, hairy child.

Ans. -Hen-Egg-Chicken.

The mother sheds tears when you take her child.

Ans.-The stem oozes some liquid juice when a mango is plucked from the tree.

Thin mother, fat child.

Ans.-Tuber.

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Mother looks dark and dirty, her children, with so much variety, so tasty.

Ans.-Cooking pot.

Single ear of the corn,weighs a ton.

Ans.-The foliage of a sago palm tree.

King's carpets, none can roll up.

Ans.-Road.

None can scratch king's pimples.

Ans.-Jack fruit.

Monkeys dance in a red cocoon.

Ans.-The flies in a ripe fig.

No door in the white house.

Ans.-Egg.

A coconut with seven eyes.

Ans.-Human head.

A wood so bend, like a bow, hundreds of sparrows, sit in a row.

Ans.-Sickle.

Translated from Kui by Anuja Mohan Pradhan

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Kumaran Asan
(1873-1924)



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A Timeless Flower: After One Hundred Years of Solitude

Rizio Yohannan Raj

A tryst with the poetry of Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) would instantly make one see how a great poet, a Mahakavi, stands apart from his lesser clansmen: his abundant, even conflicting, creative impulses are most certainly integrated within a philosophical vision deeply inspired by the timeless connections of man with other men, nature, the notion of the divine, various objects, the worlds of ideas and emotions and so on. That takes us directly to Asan's profound poetic faith. A quintessential poet, he tastefully blended in his works the finest sensual experience and an intense spiritual quest. By investing any ordinary theme with keen life and delicate beauty, he demonstrated how true poetry enriches one's heart and spirit alike. The harbinger of a new poetic enlightenment, Asan stirred up every ordinary thing that he came across to reveal its extraordinary core. The deconstructive crossing-the-border experience in this act of churning that he practiced makes a rediscovery of his art all the more relevant in the postmodern context.

Asan's awe-inspiring craft brought forth the rare gem hidden in the core of even the most familiar pebble. This was evidenced by his work from the days of "Veena Poovu" (1907), his earliest literary achievement of indisputable merit. The poem inspired by the very ordinary sight of a fallen flower deftly combines the lyrical and the elegiac in an extraordinary text that churns the opposite forces in thought and feeling within one's own self, and explores the ultimate meaning of life. Asan wrote the poem during a brief stay in Palakkad in the company of Sree Narayana Guru. It marked a significant shift from his earlier writing that mainly composed of hymns employing sanskritzed diction and meter. Undoubtedly, the poem came to be hailed as a literary classic and paved

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the way for a new movement in Malayalam literature in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Look at these stanzas from the "Veena Poovu" (The Fallen Blossom), where Asan describes the sad state of the beetle-king at the untimely death of his beloved flower:

> He will not hesitate to kill himself;
> no doubt, his distress is so immense;
> Alas! How he hits his head so hard
> against the toughest tree and rock!
>
> In deep love did the duo grow, and
> for a happy union did they yearn.
> Then the blow struck, and the bereaved
> now laments: You heartless Fate!

At this stage, a sudden churning of the stream of narrative consciousness occurs, with an altogether contradictory thought rising, and Asan now addresses the dead flower directly:

> Or, did you die of a broken heart, Flower,
> jilted by your much-loved sweetheart
> whom you'd always held in great esteem
> while he sought the charm of other blossoms?
>
> Ha, ill-fated beetle, sin's your return
> if that wild conjecture turns true!
> Think hard before perilous ventures;
> regret is the reward of recklessness.

In the following stanza there is again a paradigm shift, wherein Asan integrates the polarities in the earlier stanzas in an acute understanding of the mechanics of inner life, and also the ways of the world at large.

> Or let's leave it, for who'd know the yarn
> that the youth weave in their forlorn hearts?
> While scandals scar even the shrewd, whatever
> may come upon the meek? Blame is sin indeed!

Let us note that the contradictory voices that emerge into the open space of Asan's text are the result of a daring and vital act of churning – an act that at first disturbs and dissipates, and thus prepares the text for an essential resolution. As illustrated in the above lines, the churning of the mind is creatively channelled by the mysterious power of poetic

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imagination that is capable of integrating opposites. Here Asan readily evokes his reader's collective memory of the churning of the *ksheera sagara*, the mythical Ocean of Milk. Churning was Kumaran Asan's very own poetic act.

Time has now given us its testimony: In the centenary year of the creation of the landmark "Veena Poovu" its great bard still remains the singular intimation of the creative approach of *esemplastic* romanticism that revolutionised the Malayalam language and its literature in the modern times. In the past one hundred years, no poetic voice in the language seems to have intrepidly come forth to claim Mahakavi Kumaran Asan's priceless bequest, though one might plead with time to exclude an occasional G. Sankara Kurup or Nalappattu Narayana Menon or the best of Edappalli Raghavan Pillai from its stern statement of truth. And, sadly, across time Asan has had to endure his solitude in safeguarding his magnificent act of poetic churning.

In his time, Asan broke away from the prevalent neo-classical practice of mechanically following the classical rules in writing poetry and created a poetic world of his own where he celebrated a variety of themes and structures. The density and magnitude of the work of this poet who lived only a little more than fifty years is immense. From the early devotional poetry to the later mature works, Asan's world includes the contemplation on every possible feeling and thought that may affect a human being.

It is interesting to observe the way Asan uses 'love' as the churning stick in his act of bringing forth the nectar of his poetic creation from the depth of conflicting sentiments. After dealing with romantic love in "Veena Poovu," he explores the meaning of affectionate love in "Simhaprasavom" (A Lion in Labour). In "Nalini", the love that the hero and the heroine share transcends the barriers of death, and attains a sattvic quality, while in "Lila", the love is more earthy and rajasic. "Prarodanam", an elegy that mourns the death of A.R. Raja Raja Varma, explores the dimensions of reverential love.

"Chintaavishtayaya Seeta" (Sita Immersed in Reflection), the most part of which is a monologue, marks a remarkable change in Asan's use of structure, after the contemplative "Veena Poovu," the narrative poems "Nalini" and "Lila", his translations in the epic mode and the elegiac strain in "Prarodanam." It presents a strong feminist critique of the patriarchal justice in the Ramarajyam. The reversal of mood in Sita's repentance at the end of the poem does not at all invalidate her earlier

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righteous indignation, but only as it enhances her sense of anger into a deeper feeling of compassion and dignified love.

In 1922, the focus of Asan's poetry shifted from the contemplation on life, to his immediate social context. "Duravastha" (The Wretched Condition), written in the backdrop of the Malabar Riots, had aimed at using the memory of the riot for the benefit of regathering the community. Here, one must also remember that apart from being a poet and a philosopher, Asan had been active in his social circles, striving for the uplift of his community that had long suffered at the hands of casteism in Kerala. This commitment to the society is also to be seen as a facet of Asan's compassionate imagination that facilitated the amalgamation of multiple thoughts and sentiments in his works. This transcendental vision of love when inspired by the Buddhist sense of parity, at this stage in his life finds a societal edge in the reformative zeal in "Chandalabhikshuki", and larger spiritual dimensions in the all-encompassing empathy in "Karuna" (Compassion).

One is reminded here of James Volant Baker's discussion in *The Sacred River* on Coleridge's notion of Imagination: "The poet's creative act is not a creation *ex nihilo*, it is a process of organic becoming through which the materials are transformed into something absolutely new, and also very likely, strange." Coleridge attributed this act to a peculiar faculty of the mind called the "secondary imagination", which once activated by a free and deliberate will, 'dissolves and dissipates, in order to recreate." He termed this property of imagination "esemplastic". The significance of the esemplastic Imagination of Coleridge was that it was the single faculty within man that could achieve the romantic ambition of reuniting the subject and the object, the self and the outer nature. By looking at the creative act as an imitation of the "organic principle," the romantic philosopher sought to establish a meaningful relationship between the dream-world of the subject and the realistic world of the object.

It is such a connection between the subjective and the objective worlds that Asan's churning stick of love sought to ascertain. The act of churning thus seems to be an apt metaphor to see the secret working of this poet's imagination. The symbolic meaning of the myth of the *sagar manthan* may give ample clues to a study of Asan's creative works: the spiritual endeavour of man to attain immortality through the concentration of mind, withdrawal of senses, control of desires and practice of austerities.

The participation of conflicting voices in Asan's texts signifies the fact that when one is seeking a resolution one has to integrate and harmonise both positive and negative qualities and channelise them both to attain

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the goal. Like the mountain of Mandhara (man – mind, dhara- in a straight line) supported by the tortoise-form of Vishnu who withdraws all the senses to participate in the act of concentration – mandhara- is used as the stick to churn the ocean of consciousness, Asan's mind meditates on love in order to churn forth an abiding philosophy of living from the chaos of events. And like Lord Shiva, the destroyer of illusion, who consumes the poison *halahal*, Asan's transformational imagination shows the courage, initiative, willingness, discipline, simplicity, austerity, detachment, compassion and pure love that help the true meaning of his texts emerge out of his churning act.

Asan's allowances for doubts and antipolar points of view within the text show his appreciation of the inherent tentativeness in all human beings. He captures his characters in such critical points in their lives that contribute to the evocation of such tentativeness, which allows his text to remain a continuum beyond the end of the poem on the page. This quality of seeming endlessness found in his works seems to act as a kind of inner propulsion in Asan's poetry which makes them come back to us over and over. Ever churning, ever revealing.

A quick look at how Malayalam poetry had evolved till the turn of the 19th Century may help to contextualise the rise of Asan as "the polestar of revolution" – to use Joseph Mundassery's celebrated epithet - and understand the historical relevance of that appearance. One recalls C.S. Subramanian Potti's Preface to the *Veena Poovu*. Potti called the poem "a work in which true poetry dances through and through," written during a decadent time when the neoclassical rhyming verse or the doggerel or a book of a thousand limericks or a string of stanzas with figures of speech were being vouched for as poetry by every commoner and was beginning to agitate the hearts of the aesthetes and the prized space in various publications alike.

The poetic lineage of the Malayalee is traced back to a three-pronged linguistic culture. The undated folk traditions in Pacha Malayalam such as Thottampattu, Thiyattupattu, Onappattu and other such ritual and festival-based compositions, the Tamil influence in grammar as seen in the works during the time of *Ramacharitham*, and the elitist Champus and Sandesa kavyas of the Manipravalam literature that resulted from placing the ruby (mani) of Malayalam along with the coral (pravalam) of Sanskrit: these three streams together made the heterogeneous body of the earliest phase of Malayalam poetry. The paradigm shifted towards a process of clarifying the language with the entry of the Niranam poets who introduced the Sanskrit classical and religious literature in the language. They set the stage for the bard of *Krishna Gatha*, Cherusseri Namboothiri, who heralded

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the glorious bhakti renaissance. Ulloor was followed by the next two of the early trinity of Malayalam poetry: the luminous star of the language, Thunchathu Ramanujan Ezhuthacchan and Kalakkath Kunjan Nambiar. Aptly known as the father of Malayalam Language, Ezhuthachan reinvented the Malayalam script and replaced the thirty character Vattezhuthu with the present alphabet. Yet, his poetic tradition did not find many ingenious perpetuators in the couple of centuries that followed. In the nineteenth century, though not a fruitful time for imaginative literature, the general socio-political developments in Kerala and the influential presence of Kerala Varma Valiya Koyithampuran seemed to favour an orientation towards western models. The stage was set for a genius who would take the muse of Malayalam to unprecedented heights. And then Kumaran Asan arrived with his everlasting paradigm of churning to herald the renaissance in Malayalam poetry.

Asan's early discipleship of Sree Narayana Guru and his studies in Bangalore, Madras and Calcutta were important influences on his overall development. This time provided him with a broader outlook and deeper sensibility which had made all the difference to his poetry in an age which was reigned by decadent neo-classicism. Asan gained his open-ended poetic culture during his stay in the cities outside Kerala which gave him enough exposure to other literary traditions in India and in English. He brought back to his language all the learning and wisdom that his studies and travel and reading gave him, and rose to become a polestar indeed: showing the way.

Asan's works have something relevant to anybody reading him anytime, and are enough to inspire generations of readers. The variety of his themes is never at the cost of the complexity of life that he portrays; his work reflects man's moral and spiritual dilemmas through situations which evoke contradictory feelings. Asan did this in a period of decadent neo-classicism that considered poetry as a mere means of entertainment and illusively thought that the efficacy of poetry lies in bewildering the reader with figures and sound effects. Asan's voice had the true revolutionary spirit of romanticism and indeed paved the way to a fresh imaginative culture in Malayalam poetry.

Asan's poetry illustrates that it is the depth of emotional experience, not the abstraction of philosophy which makes poetry worthy of owning. The ambrosial word formed from the rousing act in his poetry must now yield us the undying spirit capable of recapturing our nearly lost sentiment for truly responsive poetry. Perhaps, it is this experience that we need to re-establish in the poetry of the present times. Asan's churning seems the right figure for the postmodern world.

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If postmodernism marked the collapse of the stifling intellectual abstractions of the academic circles, and thus the liberation of true literature, Asan had done something similar in the beginning of the last century to unfetter Malayalam poetry from its neoclassical bondage. The role of subjective association in Asan's poetry makes him entirely applicable in the postmodern situation.

Can one overlook the irreverence and the black humour in the utterance that ends the "Veena Poovu": "A dream, alas, this life on earth!" If it is not an intimation of the very postmodern caution against taking life too seriously, what else? It makes his text not an objective reality to be analysed but a flux of possibilities to be experienced. His art intends not only to instruct and delight but to release and set free as well through the ecstasy of reading. At this moment of revelation, time is no mere witness. It pronounces its decree: Asan's poetic will must now be open to the world at large. Free for all. The timeless flower has had enough of its solitude.

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Kumaran Asan

The Fallen Blossom

Flower of Grace, in your glorious abode
you'd once shone like a splendorous queen;
this terrible fall, no doubt, tells us again
of the fleeting sojourn of Luck on earth.

Your kind mother vine raised you in love
holding you in the fond wrap of green;
the gentle breeze rocked your cradle,
the leaves sang their rustling lullaby.

Drenched in the milky moonlight,
and full of frolic in the morning sun,
amongst the younger buds were spent
your early days in playful abandon.

In silence you shared your melodic delight
nodding to the wondrous song-birds of dawn;
Looking up to the radiant stars of the night
you learnt the cosmic meaning of the world.

You grew up, as enchanting as ever,
embodied many alluring charms, and
your countenance impassioned, O Blossom,
with cheeks blushing in a beam of joy.

What on earth could match up to a nature
so lovely, pure, soft, lithe, and simple?
For one and all, your full-bodied youth
must have offered a precious sight indeed!

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Be it a puritan disposed to stiff apathy
or a sheer coward fleeing a challenger,
anyone with eyes would have lingered, sure,
to gaze at your candid bearing of poise.

Entrancing all with your divine scent,
weren't you coveted by countless wooers!
You bore the sweetest nectar within,
which other charmers hardly owned.

Many a flower of your own kind
might have been as pleasant as you,
yet to the eyes of the loving beholder,
your delicate body had peerless grace.

Now your faint form seems to utter thus,
"My brief life had been long with events;
Hard were the days of the youth; yet, close
to my heart were those well-spent times."

Butterfly callers tried their charms on you,
hoping you'd choose them for equal looks,
whilst the clever beetle king came from far,
humming an eager tune of passionate love.

Not heeding the dapper butterflies,
you accepted this noble beetle's bid;
else he would have flown all around you
wailing out his amorous heart:

"Didn't you send away your other suitors
on the pretext of having pledged yourself
to a lover who'd be the only one for you?
Now, my beloved, don't you leave me!"

Let him perish with you, the blessed one
whom you'd mesmerized with your charm.
Why must he waste away in eternal grief,
he who was privileged to relish your glow?

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He will not hesitate to kill himself;
no doubt, his distress is so immense;
Alas! How he hits his head so hard
against the toughest tree and rock!

In deep love did the duo grow, and
for a happy union did they yearn.
Then the blow struck, and the bereaved
now laments: You heartless Fate!

Or, did you die of a broken heart, Flower,
jilted by your much-loved sweetheart
whom you'd always held in great esteem
while he sought the charm of other blossoms?

Ha, ill-fated beetle, sin's your return
if that wild conjecture turns true!
Think hard before perilous ventures;
regret is the reward of recklessness.

Or let's leave it, for who'd know the yarn
that the youth weave in their forlorn hearts?
While scandals scar even the shrewd, whatever
may come upon the meek? Blame is sin indeed!

There, the beetle makes his resolute exit,
winging across the skies; blind with grief
he traces the fantastic scent that has filled
the dear trail of his departed beloved.

Lovely Blossom, even you were not spared,
from the blow of Death's brutal hands.
Killing by custom, what distinction doth make
the hunter, between the dove and the hawk?

All the loveliness was gone in an instant,
the fair face grew pale, its splendour vanished.
What more to say? Lo, the bright new lamp
spent its oil, and went out in smoke.

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Those who woke up from their sleep to catch
your fatal fall in the early morning wind
deemed you a celestial star, or did they think
you were a sprite renouncing heaven for earth!

The earth shuddered at the awful sight
of the sad descent of your divine self;
her fright was seized by the tender grass
that at once rose in fret from the ground.

Sans the vivacious spirit you lie, here
an oyster without the pearl in its heart.
Still all the sheen is not yet lost
of your once zealous beauteous form.

Ha! The tiny spiders fondly spread
a tender gossamer shroud on you;
the gracious dawn softly lays
a parting wreath of sparkling mist.

The stars bewail your tragic fall
shedding tears of fine dew drops;
the sparrows renounce their treetop nests,
and descend on earth to mourn your fate.

Musing on your immaculate self
sweetly spent in spreading delight
and wished no ill on anyone at all,
who wouldn't lament the loss of your life?

The disaster struck; the stone melted,
the expression on the horizon fell,
the wind heaved a deep sigh, and
the pale sun grieved by the hillside.

How soon and callously did Destiny abduct
all the virtue it chose to amass in you!
Who can see into the mystery of life, and
what for? Fine souls stay not long on earth!

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Let the virtuous pass, having fruitfully lived.
Sharing its ephemeral spark, the lighting ray
lives better than the stone, the long survival
of which serves only to hurt the striding feet.

Still I languish in grief at your passing;
how you lie here in such a pitiable state!
Were we not bonded in kinship, Blossom,
brought forth by the same Providence?

The fate that is yours today will find us
one following another on your way;
Nothing stays ever: alike the high hills
and the oceans will sure vanish one day.

The sun comes stretching his great beams
to claim the charms left on your remains;
the wind acquires your sweet fragrance.
Your bequest is fulfilled: all find their due.

"What is born will die; the seed remains.
The soul leaves a frame to take another
that befits its deeds. Genesis on earth
depends on the acts," so the scriptures say.

Laments are of no avail; a disaster
may become a cause for delight;
For, due to the righteous design
life will find its home elsewhere.

Like the luminous star that sinks in the western sea
and rises again to shine forth from the eastern hill,
you who vanished here, fine flower, might bloom
on the very branch of the celestial Kalpa tree.

And you will gain your virtue
when you adorn the gorgeous locks
of the dark-haired beauties of paradise
and help them win the love of the gods.

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Or, you may become the flower of choice
in the sacrifices offered by the divine sages,
and cross the heaven to reach the ultimate
that glows beyond the darkness of bondage.

The scripture alone offers us undying peace.
Woe befits only the fool; we must surrender
our heart's burden before the sacred word.
Remember Flower, all is ordained by God.

Eyes, thou must return. This flower will dry,
decay, join the dust, and fall into oblivion.
Count anyone's mortal course thus set, and
what of tears? A dream, alas, this life on earth!

Translated from the Malayalam by Rizio Yohannan Raj

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Chanda Jha

M.M. Thakur

Kavi Chandra, popularly known as Chanda Jha all over Mithila, was born at village Pindaruckh in Darbhanga district of North Bihar on January 20, 1831. He was brought up by his maternal grandfather, Pandit Girivera Narayan Jha, at village Baragama. He was educated in the traditional manner and did well becoming well-versed in grammar and literature; his poetic genius appeared quite early. As the family could not afford to send the young man to Navadvipa in Bengal or upcountry to Banaras for further studies, he had to seek patronage as was usual at the time. He found a patron in Vasudeva Singh of village Gandhavari, a step-brother of Maheshwar Singh of Darbhanga Raj. Chanda Jha spent nearly five yearst at Gandhovari.

Meanwhile, stories about his precocious poetic gifts had spread around, and young Chanda Jha was invited by Babu Vishweshwar Narayan Singh of Narahan state in neighbouring Samastipur where he moved, in the year 1865 or 1866. Here he happened to meet Pandit Chitradhara Mishra, who was destined to become an eminent scholar. They shared the living quarters allotted to them at Narahan, and became close friends, as it happened, for the rest of their lives. At the time, Darbhanga Raj was under the court of wards under the British government since the heir apparent happened to be a minor. In 1880, Lakshmishwar Singh, the heir, came of age, assumed charge of the state and started organizing the affairs of Darbhanga Raj. A great lover of learning and the arts, Lakshmishwar Singh began looking for scholars to adorn his court. He too had heard of the growing fame of Chanda Jha. Both Chanda Jha and Chitradhara Mishra were invited by him to the court at Darbhanga. Chanda Jha was appointed the head of literature section while Pandit Chitradhara Mishra was put in charge of the gifts section. Chanda Jha lived under the patronage of Darbhanga Raj for the rest of his life, carrying on his creative work as well as his researches.

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Chanda Jha's family life was most unhappy. Having been married early, he had a grown-up, well-educated son, who died shortly after he was married. Three of his sons died too while they were still young boys, followed by the untimely death of an only daughter. The shock and grief drove his wife out of her mind. Chanda Jha passed away in his seventy-seventh year, on December 14, 1907.

'Rama-katha', the story of Rama, has been a favourite theme of poets since time immemorial, beginning with the *Ramayana* of the *Adi-Kavi*, the first poet, Valmiki. All through the centuries, *Ramayanas* have been written in Sanskrit, in Prakrit, in the *Apabhramshas*, in the different modern Indian languages as well as in those of other countries. There is some indefinable element in the great story owing to which it has remained ever-new inspite of being used so many times in different languages, in many countries.

Whatever the historical reason for it, no *Ramayana* had been written in Maithili till the middle of the nineteenth century. Chanda Jha's *Mithila Bhasha Ramayana* is one of the latest in the series.

Chanda Jha was the first to become aware of this great need, and decided to fulfil it. The poet's friend, Pandit Chitradhara Mishra, writing in his preface to the *Mithila Bhasha Ramayana* provided the background in the following words:

> In this awful age of Kali, when Sanskrit studies have greatly declined, there is a great need for a book from which all and sundry may derive the knowledge of their cultural tradition, their dharma and their duties. In the north-west region, the heartland of India, in Madhya Pradesh and in the western region of Bihar, this need is being met by the Ramayana of Goswami Tulsidasa, but there was no such book in this holy land of Mithila which even ordinary educated people could enjoy reading as well as earn merit. With this great need in view, the late poet Kaveeshwar Chanda Jha produced the *Mithila Bhasha Ramayana* using many various kinds of metre. On its very first appearance all the copies of the book were sold out while Kaveeshwar was still living...

In the second edition of his *Maithili Grammar* (1906), George Abraham Grierson chose to single him out:

> Under the enlightened guidance of the late Maharaja of Dharbhanga, there has been a remarkable revival of Maithili Literature during the past few years. As least one author deserving of special note has come to the

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front, Chanda Jha, who has shown remarkable literary powers. He has written a *Mithila Bhasha Ramayana* and a translation....

Babu Nagendranath Gupta, the noted Bengali Scholar, in the course of his work for his edition of *Vidyapati Padavali*, acknowledged his debt to Chanda Jha as follows:

> Darbhanga Maharaja requrested Kaveeshwar Chanda Jha to help me. At the time Chanda Jha was over seventy years old. He knew Sanskrit poetry well, and was himself writing poetry in Maithili; there was no one around who was so well-acquainted with Vidyapati's works. Chanda Jha cooperated with me, with great ardour. Without his help, it would not have been possible to edit the entire poetry of Vidyapati.

Condoling his death in 1907, the Maithili journal *Maithil Hita Sadhan* paid the following homage to Chanda Jha:

> For the supreme good that this great man has done to the land (of Mithila) by his life-long dedicated service to this mother-tongue, not only Maithila but Maithili language itself will long remain indebted and grateful to him. He had such a comprehensive knowledge of the ancient history and culture of Mithila that he was held in high esteem by the elite and the educated people of the land. The edition of the songs of Vidyapati brought out by Sharadacharan Mitra, Judge of Calcutta High Court, and Nagendranath Gupta, owed most to Chanda Jha's labours...

In view of the above comments, there is no doubt that Chanda Jha's *Mithila Bhasha Ramayana* along with his other contributions to Maithili literature heralded the renaissance of Maithili language and literature in the twentieth century.

As far as Chanda Jha's *Ramayana* is concerned, the work distinguished itself from other versions of the Rama story by the poet's special emphasis on and his deep feeling for the figure of Sita, the daughter of the land of Mithila, as the focus of his epic poem.

Chanda Jha's death exactly a century ago, left behind a new epoch in the revival of Maithili language, literature and culture, and his work remains an important milestone on the high road of the resurgence of Mithila. ❑

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Excerpts from *Under Childhood Skies*

Sara Mathai Stinus

Juan's Brief Childhood

Only one Maud have I known in my entire life. Maud was probably not even her real name, and when and why the syllable "theen" was added to it she herself could not explain. Maudtheen became Madtheen, for who distinguishes between au and a? Madtheen was the name she had responded to as far back as she could remember.

Father would sometimes say that not many had a name that suited so well: she was crazy and that was for sure. In his opinion it was the devil himself who raged in her when she had her outbursts. They began with ill-tempered mutterings which grew in volume until she was shrieking and foaming at the mouth. Our pots and pans suffered exceedingly if she for instance had the attack in the middle of dish-washing. If it happened while she was washing clothes, there was not a thing we could do to drag her away from the wash-stone: she seated herself heavily on it and appeared totally indifferent to her surroundings. We children who were absorbed in Madtheen's outburst were never given the chance of seeing how the notorious devil left her. Every time we stood about expectantly for him to come out, Father's authoritative voice would be heard instructing us precisely on what each one of us should go and do, and his instructions were not to be trifled with.

The place where I was born was a small town, or rather, a big village. This little dot on the west coast had the foothills of the Sahyadri mountains as its easten boundary, while the river Sharavati made up its southern limit. A broad stretch of land alongside the river lay so considerably lower than the rest of the town, that it was called the lower quarter. The house we lived in was situated on the plain bordering this area. The large garden around the house was referred to by the English

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word 'compound'. It was not our property, but we had the user's right to it. Behind the house was the lavatory, a place we children did not dare make use of, because it was right on the edge of the compound and the chute at least 30 metres deep. Two roads, one on each side of the compound, led to the low-lying area. A bigger and better road in front of the compound, connected the town's important centre and the upland. Bare in patches, wooded now and then, with grazing grounds and small and larger ponds, this extensive landscape was our realm of adventure.

Some of the tracks made by bullock cart wheels and human feet on the rough and stony rise led to remote hamlets. But there where the town road ended, was the beginning of a private road that belonged to the forest department. A sign-post in English carried a warning to intruders to keep off the winding road which cut its way impressively through obstacles and climbed right up to a building resting on a rocky projection. A solid stone wall with a gate of iron oars affirmed the inaccessibility of the splendour within to the ordinary inhabitants of the plain and the lowland. Though this building was not as tall as the headmaster's bungalow, in the number of glass windows it had, it surpassed everything we had seen in that region. It was as if the evening sun sent its orange coloured glow over the earth for the sole purpose of letting it be caught by these panes. The facade facing the river-mouth resembled a beautiful bonfire at sunset.

Here, along the wall and further up on the rise, a track wound its way between low berry bushes and thorny shrubs. We were not allowed to stroll here except in the company of adults. The track ended abruptly as if it couldn't be bothered anymore and preferred to rest on a dark granite block invitingly located just there. The cool evening breeze and the fatigue caused by the strenuous walk made us fling ourselves on this rock. Resting on our backs we observed the swiftly changing colours of the clouds. The lowland lay stretched at our feet. Hardly any houses were to be seen down there, the innumerable tree-tops hid them. The coconut palm predominated. The Roman Catholic church which was of more recent origin with its whitewashed dome and big cross failed to make an impressive appearance from up here. The Sharavati could be seen on the other side of the luxuriant green stretch of land. The sea was further away now. The casuarina-covered island at the mouth of the river resembled a dark spot. Peace reigned everywhere, on earth and water, the sky was tinged with dreams. It will not be long before the night falls, and in the dark the homeward trip could be dangerous, but the grown-ups permitted us to remain until the last curve of the sun sank into the sea. It was very important for us to think of a wish just

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at the very moment the sun disappeared, a wish one was not supposed to reveal even to one's best friend.

Not far from the church down there, in a small palm leaf thatched house lives Madtheen. She has two sons. Juan is the youngest, a little older than I, but small and thin for his age. We seldom saw Felix the several years older brother. Unlike Juan he did not come to our house to fetch his mother. Though he lived with her, he did not always return home at night. He did not care to offer explanations that might have comforted her. It was obvious that Madtheen had no control over him. In her desperation she would call him "son of a dog" and "Satan's foster-child". It was rumoured that the boy had fallen into bad company: he drank and stole, and only when he had used up all his money did he bother to find his way home.

"He takes after his father," she told Mother, "and one day he is sure to disappear, just like his devil of a father, out of my life. I shall then be really at peace. I have no idea which fate awaits him, and I don't care what happens. I have suffered so much on account of him, and now I am tired, tired of blows and kicks. God damn him till eternity come." Mother tried to say some comforting words, but Madtheen was sobbing and hid her face in the end of her sari. Her rather bulky body swung to and fro on the low stool. The tamarinds which the two women were shelling and stoning lay on a square winnower between them—forgotten.

I barely understood the gravity of Madtheen's tears and was disappointed when she stopped crying, and her face behind the sari end became visible. The colour of the eyes had changed: the whites had become pinkish with dark brown splotches like a fluid someone had muddied. I noticed that her fingers trembled as she lifted the hand to her nose. Her round chin quivered continuously as if a muscle had got out of control. I looked at Mother. The wedding ring on her finger seemed to be tight, or was it that her ring finger had become thicker? A sewing needle with a bit of white thread was stuck into the hair bun on her nape. It was a safe place, and she did not have to waste time looking for it. Her face did not divulge her feelings and her thoughts. Then she caught sight of me and realised that a child had overheard a mother cursing her own son, her own flesh. Immediately I was sent off to the hen house to look for fresh eggs!

Under no circumstance was she to let Juan neglect his schooling, that had been Father's advice to Madtheen. If the boy needed help with his lessons, he should just come over to us. Father himself was a teacher at St. Thomas School, and the school had a reputation for providing

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excellent instruction. The primary section attached to Father's school was very close to it, and a couple of kilometres distant from our home. Were we to take a short cut through some fields, it would take us a quarter of an hour to reach it. Madtheen's house was too distant from the primary school, and Juan too young to be trusted to walk to and back from school on his own.

Only the road in front of the compound separated us from another institution called the Workshop. It belonged to a religious order of brothers whose head was a Father. I do not know whether Brother George and Brother John who managed the everyday affairs were Spaniards or Portuguese. Their skin was white and underneath the calottes they had slightly frizzy black hair. Brother George was the younger of the two and the one I liked a lot. He would seat me on his knee, pat me on the head and tell me that I looked like a cashew fruit. Once in a while he would give me a sweet which he fished out of his soutane pocket. Under the soutane he wore trousers, but he never seemed to be sweaty with all those thick garments. Whenever Father sent me on some errand or other to the Brothers, I chose to go to Brother George's door. I would stand long behind the dark curtain between the narrow veranda and the room before I began to cough or clear my throat. Sometimes it was Brother John with the somewhat distracted and grave look who heard me first and came out of the room next door. It would never occur to him to offer me a biscuit from the square tin. Moreover he spoke Kannada rather badly, and so on the whole I got nothing out of being a messenger if it was he who received me.

When he was about five or six, Juan had gone for a while to the primary school run by the Workshop. He was possibly word-blind, a then unknown concept to both teachers and parents. In any case, he did not benefit from sitting in class. He played truant, was thrashed by the Brothers, got beatings from the teacher, until the mother let him stop going to school. My father was willing to discuss Juan's case with the Brothers, and persuade them to admit him as a boarder.

The Workshop was practically a home for orphan boys. Almost 90% of the Workshop school came from Brahmavar, the town where the Brother-mission had its headquarters. It was not solely boys who lived in the Workshop, but boys and girls from our town were admitted to the school as day pupils. The Workshop boys were dressed alike in uniform, dark gray shorts and short sleeved shirts. They ranged in age from four to eighteen. The older boys took care of the youngest ones and chastised them brutally if they could get away with it. The boys suffered often from colds and many of them coughed. In the rainy season especially, their perpetual grating coughs would be heard. As they did

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not have any family, never got visitors and received no letters. All the big boys who had stopped attending school, worked continuously for many hours in the different sections of the Workshop.

The triple-winged building was big and solid and was double-storeyed. The ground-floor of one wing was the primary school which I attended for four years. The floor above it was the church of the Brother-mission. As there was no parish outside the Workshop, the church was used only by the inmates. All the same it was equipped with an enormous bell that could be heard for miles around every time it rang: and it happened three times a day! None of the dogs we have had, cared much for the peals. The moment the first clang was emitted by the bell, they let out wild howls which added to Father's irritation over the daily dose of noise.

In all likelihood Juan would never manage to learn to read and write, but he might pick up some skill or other at the Workshop which would later enable him to make a living. Mother was uneasy, but said nothing to Madtheen. It was common knowledge that the boys of the Workshop were neglected in several respects, that the food was poor, that severe punishment was meted out for disobedience and laziness, and that the manual jobs were heavy. There were many chores; laundry work, cooking[1], firewood chopping, cleaning, mucking out the stable, tending the vegetable garden, drawing water from the well etc.

The Workshop school had two teachers from the town itself and one of them was, to put it mildly, stern. The boarders in particular were the ones who got the worst of it, but the day pupils too were not spared. In their case some consideration at least was shown for their family background. The luckiest were the girls. I do not remember having to stand in front of the class and bending knees a hundred times or pulling my ears with crossed arms and simultaneously bending knees. Only boys were caned, and at times the teacher directed one of the brighter boys from the class to administer a precise number of strokes to the offender. Added to that would be the lashes Juan was sure to get from Brother George and John, who were both stronger and stricter than the school teachers. Any boy who had committed an offence was sure to be tied to a stake and flogged.

Father believed in discipline and was of the opinion that physical punishment was necessary now and then, But it was to be exercised with great moderation and only as a last solution. "Spare the rod and spoil the child," was a proverb familiar to us. Father did not approve of the methods of punishment resorted to by the Brothers, and the fact that he let them know it on some occasions, gave rise to a certain coolness between them and him.

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Juan was better off at home with his poor mother. She earned a very small sum working for us. Father's salary as a teacher was modest, and we were a large family. Moreover, he had obligations towards his nephews and nieces. Madtheen was not fully employed by us, she came a few times a week and helped Mother with the laundry, house cleaning, washing of kitchen utensils and so on. Sometimes she was given discarded boys' clothes for Felix and Juan, and once in a blue moon she got one of Mother's old saries. Her gait was heavy and she dragged her left leg, which resulted in her taking at least three quarters of an hour to walk the distance from her home to ours. When she turned up around mid-morning she was served a bowlful of rice-gruel that had been set aside from our breakfast for her. She appreciated getting coffee, but we could not afford to give her that. She was never spoken to roughly, and Mother was considerate towards her as she was towards all who were in strained circumstances. It was her conviction that we were not rewarded in life according to our merits, and should one be amongst the fortunate, then one was duty bound to be good to others.

Madtheen assisted with house work in some other homes as well in order to be able to provide for her sons and herself. It was Juan's future that worried her more than anything else. It was for that boy's sake that she endured everything. If only she could be sure that life would be merciful to him! She toiled, attended mass every Sunday, fasted and lighted candles for Holy Mary at the alter-niche opposite the police station. It was impossible for a person to do more than that. In the other homes where she worked, the employers were not pleased to see Juan accompanying his mother. Perhaps he might steal, or disturb her in her chores, or presumably he expected to get a meal. But could Madtheen leave him alone at home without anyone to keep an eye on him during all those many hours? What was she to do? Her sense of helplessness increased. More and more often she was plagued by headaches, and it was obvious that her ability to concentrate was failing. Her fits of rage came on at shorter intervals and lasted longer. She scolded Juan for the slightest fault. Mother had to intervene when she began to strike him without the least ground. With each passing day she turned more and more drab and Juan more and more scared. But she was vehemently opposed to the idea of her son being admitted to the Workshop: true enough that the boy had no father, but he did have a mother, didn't he? She was adamant in her decision.

My parents knew a family in Karwar, a harbour town four hours from our town by bus. The family was Catholic and reasonably well off. The head of the house was employed by the customs department, and in this capacity had a large circle of acquaintances. There was every

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likelihood that he should be able to find an opening for Juan as apprentice or helper. Consequently a letter was sent to the Kaspar family in Karwar. Within a week a reply came. Mr. and Mrs. Kaspar were looking for a decent boy who could help their cook with odd jobs in the kitchen as well as wait at table. The boy should however not expect to earn a salary right away. On the other hand he would receive board and lodging, as well as clothes according to need. Should he prove satisfactory, they would be glad to extend his mother a helping hand at Christmas. They promised to look after the boy well and keep my father posted of everything relevant.

Madtheen cried openly when Father translated the letter for her. She was just as happy as she was sorrowful. "God bless you," she repeated many times. It was decided that Juan should leave as soon as possible. Father saw to the bus ticket. Juan was told to remain seated in the bus until it did not go any further. On no account was he to get off the bus at the bus stands in Kumta and Ankola. Once in Karwar he was to look for a big whitewashed building and follow the road alongside of it. When shortly thereafter he caught sight of the sea, he was to turn left and not stop till he came to an arched wrought iron gate. There he was to ask for Mr. Kaspar.

Madtheen did her best to appear calm while the preparations were on. Finally the day dawned for Juan's journey into the big world. Accompanied by Madtheen he came to our house to bid us good-bye and receive the blessings of the adults. Father and I followed them to the bus stand. No one spoke, we walked silently. Father did not know that I had a whole anna in my hand for Juan from Mother. I was not to slip it into Juan's pocket until he was about to get into the bus.

Everything is set for the departure. Father says something or other meant to hearten Madtheen who stands there as one paralysed. There is a look of confusion in Juan's eyes, it is the very first time he is on a bus. He seats himself at a window and hugs the cloth bundle that contains all that he possesses. All of a sudden Father begins to enjoin him on the importance of honesty and diligence. His behaviour should never bring shame to his mother.

Madtheen did not utter a single word.

As the bus started moving, Father called out, "May God go with you." We continued to stand and watched the dust cloud rising behind the bus. I turned round and saw the tears trickle down Madtheen's cheeks. Who knows how long it will be before mother and son get to see each other!

When the dust settled, the bus was gone. Juan, barely nine, was on his way alone into a strange world.

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In the new room which all of us helped to build, was the largest piece of furniture in the house, the double-bed cot. It was so wide that three of us could sleep in it. But if we lay across on it, all five of us children, that is the five of us staying at home, could easily be there. The thick mattress in the blue-striped case was stuffed with coconut fibre, and was heavy to carry when it required to be sunned. The bed was made of wood, and its bottom consisted of solid planks that were detachable. It was in the shade of our largest mango tree that its creation took place. Father planned its appearance, and the workmanship was the contribution of Pandu. Shastri-master, the drawing teacher of St. Thomas School knew Pandu and had recommended him to Father.

Besides being the drawing teacher, Shastri-master was the town's photographer. He was considered to be capable in both fields. I found the drawing lessons to be taxing if we were asked to copy a vase with a flower in it standing on a table. We were to throw it into relief by pencil strokes, and I never could get my drawing to resemble the object we were told to draw. Fortunately Shastri-master never showed any anger; he only shook his head as if to say that he understood that I couldn't help my lack of artistic talent. When we worked with colours I always got a pat on my shoulders but unfortunately it was rather seldom we were allowed to choose the colours we liked best. He had fat soft cheeks and kind brown eyes. Anyone wanting a wedding photo would send for him. His head would disappear under a black cloth behind the camera a few times before he decided that everything we others could not see was as it should be. It was also he who framed the photos and it was in this connection that he had got to know Pandu.

Pandu was in his middle twenties, tall and slim. One could see on him that he was an ardent supporter of the Indian National Congress; he always wore the white cotton cap known as the Congress-cap. He set up his workshop shed under the mango tree and stacked the timber arriving by bullock cart next to it. We hung about him and watched every move of his keenly. We were perhaps in his way, but he didn't say so. He had a pencil to jot down the measurements with, but instead of using paper he noted everything down directly on the timber. When the pencil was not in use, it rested behind his ear. Father had given us permission to watch the making of the cot, and I had hoped that some time or other Pandu would ask me to do him some service.

He didn't really pay any attention to us, there were other things demanding his attention. For several days he came to us, and Mother

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saw to it that he got a glass of tea in the afternoon. Though he did not waste his time having fun with us, we got to like him. With each passing day our admiration for his skill increased; that he loved his work was obvious. Part of the work connected with the bed-ends and legs he took home with him, as it called for special tools, lathe amongst others, which he kept in his workshed at home. At long last the cot stood ready under the leafy shade of the mango tree—a high cot with finely turned legs and ends, lacking only a coat of varnish. Finally it stood there glistening with beauty. Father was exceedingly pleased with Pandu's work and was full of praise for his workmanship.

The bed was in use, and before many days had elapsed we had forgotten to give it any special thought. But Pandu was not forgotten; we even missed the goings on under the mango tree where we had spent many hours watching his skilful hands. In the course of time, also this receded into the background as new days filled with other exciting things turned up.

One morning when we least of all expected to see the school peon, we saw him hastening towards our door.

It was not unusual for Ambrose-anna to turn up on some errand, but his speedy gait disturbed us. He created an even greater stir by asking to speak to Father in private. Our curiosity was immediately aroused. What could it be that none of us was allowed to hear? It wouldn't have helped hiding behind the door, because they walked out into the yard. They walked to and fro until Ambrose-anna'a account came to an end. Now Father walked back to the house and called out to Mother. But she wasn't within ear-shot and so it didn't help that he called out "listen."

"Listen" was my parents' way of attracting each other's attention. The names were never used; sometimes they said "we" or "ours" when the one meant "you." While talking to others the one referred to the other as the children's mother or father. We did not use "you" or the more respectful plural form of that word when we talked to our parents or others who were our seniors. I had only my younger brother whom I could address with a "you."

One of us ran behind the house to fetch Mother. She knew at once that something unusual had taken place. Apparently Father did not pay heed to our presence as he plainly told Mother about the matter just brought to his notice. Pandu had had a fight with his brother and had unwittingly killed him. The police had arrested him and led him away in chains. Mother reached out and held on to the back of the chair nearest her, as though she was about to lose the ability to stand

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upright. Then she seated herself and we saw her pale fingers seeking comfort in one another. We were petrified. What would happen to Pandu? Would he be locked up in a dark room the rest of his life? Would Father be able to do anything for the man whom we all liked?

The prison building was located on the way to the hill. It was a dark and dismal stone building with two side wings, the one functioning as the residence of the policemen, and the other as lockup. The middle building was the police office. I had never been behind the wide gate with pointed iron rods, but we did look sometimes though the grill to see if there was anything interesting going on in there. A high wall fitted with sharp glass pieces made flight impossible for the confined. The gate was kept locked and an armed guard kept those who had errands at the police office under surveillance. I was terribly scared of the police constables, and they figured in my nightmares. I was more scared of them than of the prisoners whom from time to time we met when, chained in twos, they were on their way back to their cage after finishing work somewhere out in town. We did not know any of them, but all the same we felt sorry for these men and thought it a pity that they were doomed to live in captivity. One of the two constables who were escorting them had a long firearm resting against his left shoulder, while the other marched with a solid club in his hand.

Pandu was a decent man. He lived by honest work, and his pride lay in perfecting his craft to the best of his ability. Why did he have to land in that wretched house amidst thieves, robbers and swindlers? Would he have a chance at all of remaining in Honavar? In all probability for such a serious offence as murder, Karwar would be the likely place where he would have to remain for ever. May be just as well, for how would we react if we met him in chains, urged on by guards? It would be unbearable to think of him as being behind the grill gate, locked up in a dark, little room without windows.

Father took some brisk steps back and forth on the veranda, and we knew that he was thinking. Perhaps he was pondering over what had happened and what the consequences would be for Pandu. When he halted all of a sudden, we believed that he had thought out a solution that would save our Pandu. Bat he was only a teacher, not a judge nor the highest officer of the district, the Collector. Father had no power to release the man. The only thing he could do was to try and get permission to speak with Pandu who was already in the lock-up. If Father was fortunate and got all the details divulged, perhaps then he would be able to present the case to the honourable Collector before the Prosecution did so.

Father put on a clean shirt, changed into a dhoti and hurried to

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the jail. He was permitted to see Pandu who was brought out of his cell with handcuffs, as though he would otherwise commit violence against whomsoever. He was a pathetic sight. The lustre was gone from his eyes, and the blood stains on his clothes betrayed the horrible incident that had taken place, the face was expressionless, as though he did not understand the desperate situation he was in, and the chained hands hanging down in front of him seemed not to be his at all. Like a sleepwalker he stood before Father while the constable who had led him to the prison veranda looked on without comprehending the two who could not pull themselves together to exchange even a single word. Father stared at the two hands in chains in front of him: these hands so skilful at creating beautiful and useful things, had caused a senseless deprivation of a human life, and at that a brother's.

The silence was broken by the constable. If the two gentlemen had nothing to say to each other, he would suggest that the visit be considered terminated. Father shook off the heavy stupor that had descended on him and said in a low voice that he had heard about what had happened, but did not know what had led to it. He had not come to accuse Pandu, neither was there any question of promises being made. Only the details of the case was of interest to him. In all likelihood there was something or other that might prove to be to the advantage of poor Pandu.

We had finished our lunch when Father finally returned home. He appeared thoughtful, and we dared not question him right away. His food had turned cold but he wouldn't hear of Mother warming it. Patiently we waited around the table and did our best to avoid drawing unfavorable attention to ourselves. After a few mouthfuls of rice he looked at us gathered round the big table with the somewhat worn oilcloth, and decided to share with us whatever he had got out of his visit to Pandu. Contrary to his usual habit of spinning a story out, he narrated rather quickly of Pandu and Mangesh.

Venkat was Pandu's best friend. They had known each other ever since Pandu along with his older brother Mangesh had moved to Honavar from their birthplace. As they both had their jobs to attend to, the friends saw each other somewhat irregularly. Venkat was employed by the P.W.D. - Public Works Department - as a warehouse keeper and had a steady pay. He was unmarried and lived with his relatives close to the harbour. Now and then he would walk home along a roundabout way after work. On this detour was a palm-leaf thatched house where coconut palm toddy was both sold and served. It was precisely there Venkat liked to halt for a short while. No one had ever seen him drunk, neither in

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that house nor on the road. All the same it was rumored that he was a drunkard. Pandu defended his friend against those who spread these false rumours and did not conceal his irritation over people who without knowing Venkat sullied his name. Venkat attended to his work, and there was never any complaint of neglect or carelessness, on the contrary Mr. Lobo, his superior at the P.W.D., was quite satisfied with his work.

It was not very often that the friends got together. Firstly they lived far apart from one another, and Pandu's work left him but little spare time. Secondly his older brother Mangesh was not pleased with Venkat's visits. Perhaps he believed the rumours and was afraid that Pandu's exposure to Venkat's influence would do him harm. If Mangesh was lukewarm towards the visitor, then his wife was even worse. She would not ask him if he would like a cup of tea and wouldn't offer him a pan to chew. Inspite of the obvious disapproval of the family, the friendship between the two lasted.

The day previous to the violent clash, Venkat had been visiting Pandu. They sat under a tamarind tree in the garden and talked about all sorts of matters as they used to. When they had nothing more to talk about Pandu went in to get some playing cards. So engrossed were they in the game that they were taken by surprise when they discovered that the day was drawing to a close. Now they got the smell of smoke from the hearths of the nearby houses. Women were occupied with their various jobs before darkness fell.

Venkat got up and was about to part from his friend. Right then Mangesh came out of the house. His facial expression revealed that something was wrong. With quick steps he approached them and immediately began accusing Venkat of having stolen his wife's earrings. The brother's voice was hard to recognise, so excited he was. "What have you done with my wife's earrings?" he yelled. "What are you talking about?" asked Venkat astounded. "He there, your friend, has stolen Bhabi's jewellery. She had forgotten them in the bath house. Ask him yourself." Pandu did not believe his own ears; how could anyone think of laying the blame for the missing jewellery on Venkat? He tried to hush his brother—there was no reason to let everybody in the neighbourhood know what was happening here. But Mangesh was not easily stopped. He now demanded that Venkat turn over his pockets and stepped closer as if he had a mind to do it himself. Pandu resisted this with some vehemence and pushed his brother away from Venkat, at the same time requesting his friend hurry home. The brothers went on fighting while Venkat, against his will, left the place.

Things did not improve when the two went into the house, as

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it turned out that Bhabi was now all set for an attack. One would think she herself had been a witness to the theft of the jewellery, so sure she was in her accusation against Venkat. There was nothing else to do but to show restraint, and Pandu tried to calm her down with sensible words. Venkat had of course been with him all evening and therefore it could not be him. And secondly, how on earth should he have known that something valuable was forgotten in the bath house? It did not help, and she and Mangesh insisted that no visitor had approached the house since Bhabi took her bath around five o'clock. Pandu felt lonely. Without exchanging a single word with anyone he ate his dinner and shortly after went to bed.

He slept restlessly. After what seemed like a long night he rose before sunrise. He hoped that the fresh morning breeze would cheer his spirit and fill the day with good deeds. Several tasks awaited him, and he decided to get started right away. Pandu went across to the covered shed that was his workshop. He spent some time sawing, then he remembered that he needed to finish planing a plank. The hands moved mechanilcally, and the usual joy at seeing the work progressing was lacking. Sad at heart he uttered the family god Pandurang's name many times in the hope of getting out of the depressing mood. Suddenly he heard footsteps behind him and discovered that Mangesh had come to him. Sleep had not given his face a milder expression. His words were even harder than those Pandu had had to listen to the previous evening. It was all Pandu's fault. Why did he have to cling to Venkat who was a hopeless drunkard and thief? Pandu remained silent. He had nothing to say. The rays of the sun penetrated through his thin shirt and warmed his back. He continued with the planning. It was not an act of demonstration, it would never occur to him to offend his older brother.

Just as he thought that Mangeah did not have any further accusations to make, he was violently grabbed from behind by the shoulders and turned around until their eyes met. In a thick voice Mangesh shouted that Pandu should replace Bhabi's jewellery. Pandu heard his own desperate voice whisper that he would never agree to that. As in a dream he saw Mangesh reach out for the saw. All of a sudden everything went black for Pandu, and from a great distance he heard his brother moan for mercy, heard him say that it should not happen. With effort he tore himself loose from the feeling of unreality that had possessed him and was horrified at the sight of the brother lying in a pool of blood. Bhabi and several neighbours came rushing out of the houses. There was blood everywhere, also on Pandu's clothes, and worst of all, the deadly saw hung from Pandu's limp hand! How could it be that Mangeah was lying

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doubled up at his feet? Why did everyone stare at him as though he were a brute and not the diligent carpenter that they knew? It was only when Bhabi's heart-rending cry reached his ears that he saw two familiar men carefully step up to him and remove the murder weapon from his hand. Later the police arrived with firearms and handcuffs, and there was no more to add.

It took long before Pandu's case was taken up. Father did what he could; he had a little knowledge of court procedure from the times when he had sat on the jury, and it was our earnest hope that he would succeed in influencing the Collector to pass a mild sentence. But Mr. Murchison was a strict enforcer of legal provisions and had little understanding of the human aspects; to him background, circumstance and character did not carry weight in such matters. Father did not succeed; in Mr. Murchison's eyes Pandu was a common murderer. The verdict was imprisonment for life in the Andamans, the island of deportation far away in the Bay of Bengal.

We grieved for a long time the hard fate that had befallen Pandu.

Translated from the original Danish Under Bardommens Himmel by the Author

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Ecocriticism, Ethics and the Vedic Thought

T.J. Abraham

Ecocritical thought, as it is understood today, is weighed down by numerous apparently insoluble contradictions, and an analysis of which, t is hoped, will address some fundamental issues plaguing the discipline nd show why in its present form, it is destined to fail as a movement. The present impasse in ecocritical thought springs as much from its inherent ontradictions as from the absence of a firm ethical, philosophical nderpinning. This study tries to highlight a few such paradoxes in cocriticism, especially in its western variety, and calls for a perspectival hift in the form of a philosophical framework.

The first paradox is that human beings cannot entirely do away vith the 'use' of non-human sphere, as cultural productions of all sorts ecessitate the use, and even some exploitation, of nature. Because the on-human realm bears the brunt of the human production processes nd consumption habits, neither an exit from civilization for forest, nor naximal amount of ecological awareness can turn us away from 'using' ature completely. Hence one has the impossible task of differentiating he 'right' use of nature from the 'wrong' one. Secondly, the notion of return to nature is ambiguous due to the sheer range of meaning that he word 'nature' carries. If the term 'nature' designates at once the pure vilderness of deserts and oceans as well as the mechanically mediated ultivations, parks and gardens, a dialogue on ecocriticism is liable to rminate in a series of equivocations. Hence unless more clarity on the eaning of nature, specifically the permissible extent of human cultural tervention in the nonhuman sphere to be termed nature, is available, he call for a return to nature will remain ambiguous.

Thirdly, the votaries of 'deep ecology' (the radical ecologists advocating return to forests) deride the army of 'light greens' (activists of protection f environment) describing them pejoratively as "environmentalists" who

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value nature solely for human survival and for ensuring the promotion of their own welfare. Rather than love for nature, the position of such environmental activists according to the deep ecologists, is diehard narcissism masquerading as ecocriticism, embedded in blatant anthropocentrism which ends up eventually as yet another talk about human future welfare. Hence the question is whether the present love of man for nature is any more than a spin-off in his concern for our own comforts. Here one needs to be particularly aware that a variety of professedly antihumanist contemporary theories under the structuralist and poststructuralist banner, even as they emphatically declared the 'end of man', 'end of philosophy', 'death of God' etc., ended up by making those apocalyptic shibboleths, self-defeating utterances amid a discourse that suppressed the nonhuman 'other'. That their antihumanist stance has not been vindicated in the contemporary western thought, by according the nonhuman sphere its due, is a cause for worry. Hence we seem to be badly in want of a philosophy that valorises nature for its own sake rather than for our sake. The question, then, is about the viability of both ecocriticism as well as a return to nature where the nonhuman is not valued for its own worth.

The fourth paradox concerns ecology and textuality. The issue here is both about the possibility of an extralinguistic reality and also about the reliability of language-mediated reality. The former deals with the realm beyond language or the 'problem of the real' as poststructuralists term it. Ecocriticism came up, one recalls, as a reaction against the debilitatingly excessive textualized view that only "the word grants being to a thing." Yet, merely acknowledging a world beyond textuality alone will not help matters. Instead, the 'real' world has to be deciphered and interpreted, which involves, among other things, the perception and interpretation of the alleged complex channels of communication and interaction between the biotic community and the inorganic world surrounding it, the language of birds, winds and oceans, the songs of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions and a host of alleged signifying systems in the natural world which continue to remain outside our ken, because they are not properly textualized. One wonders whether these can ever be textualized and hence made intelligible to man. If our ability to 'know' the nonhuman is so limited in scope, aren't we highhanded in our assumption that we have 'understood' nature and that nature is to be 'used' for our convenience?

On the other hand, the physical nature—solar system, soils, water, air, plants, animals etc.—precedes language and they have, for sure, conditioned the emerging human linguistic signifying system in complex

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ways. Scientists from various branches testify to the presence of a variety of nonhuman signifying systems—whether it appears in the form of the information storehouse of the genetic code or as the entire gamut of indexical signs instinctively released by plants and animals or as the deliberate generation of signs by the biosphere. Yet all these are analysed and interpreted through a language with a humanist bias. Needless to say that any signifying system including language cannot be neutral, but only pro-speciesist. Hence, with absolute dependence on the linguistic tool that is too heavily loaded in favour of human beings, is not our hope to have an objective understanding of the nonhuman 'other' rather simplistic? This is yet another paradox in our attempt to understand and master the more than human world.

Finally, the greatest paradox is in our conception of ourselves vis-à-vis the nonhuman 'other'. Lynn White says, "what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny..." (Glotfelty 10). The western enlightenment project, by and large, reinforced the anthropocentric assumption of the centrality of human individual and upheld the view that the nonhuman world existed for human welfare. As a corollary, nature came to be viewed as not only thoroughly knowable but also to be mastered and exploited by man. Nature, in addition, was assumed to be more or less a passive recipient of human onslaught. However, the apocalyptic pronouncements made by new systems such as Chaos Theory and Complexity Theory etc. compel us to discard, revise and reformulate some of our cherished beliefs about the nonhuman 'other'. According to these theorists, in general, the natural world, far from passive and compliant to human intervention, is indeed intractable and responsive in unpredictable ways.

The roots of Chaos Theory can be traced back to the year 1960 when Edward Lorenz found that minute errors in the equations he was using to model weather systems resulted in enormous and apparently unpredictable variations in the final results. Chaos Theory demolishes the totalizing truth claims of contemporary science, as it cautions us about the mysterious forces (known as strange attractors, butterfly effect, etc.) in control of natural systems, due to which predictions about nature cannot be made with certainty. Such findings stress the need for negotiating a nature which is not only impenetrable but is positively ungovernable as well.

Complexity Theory talks about self-organizing systems in a world teeming with complex systems. The theorists of this school claim that systems, both human and nonhuman, are self-organizing, and that self-

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organization is a spontaneous process occurring at certain critical periods of time, especially at what they describe as the 'edge of chaos'. Such a self-organization, they say, takes the respective system to a higher degree of complexity. The universe is believed to be such a system continually in the process of self-organization. Besides, these theorists also consider human beings (consciousness) as one such self-organizing system among other numerous nonhuman systems. These revelations raise serious doubts about our mastery over both the nonhuman world and over ourselves as well. In short, Complexity theorists forewarn us that nature is not 'always already' any more than the antiessentialist human subject.[1]

Here, two important points may be recalled. First, questions like whether nature is subordinated, or nature is silent and passive, tingle with irony. Second, even as our extravagant claim of mastery over such a universe appears to be mere delusion of grandeur, we increasingly fashion an ecologically degraded earth due to our technological manipulation. The earth is already showing its impact in a big way, and it calls for concerted action before it is too late.

However, any such concerted action has to be predicated on an ethical framework which values the non-human world for its own sake and which assumes the human and the nonhuman to be two interdependent realms always in process. Indeed, ecocritical movement calls for a completion of the radical approach set in motion by poststructuralism that sought to put in shape an oppressive world order based on gender, class, race, and nation. Ecocriticism, hence, engages the question of justice and argues for the rights of the nonhuman sphere. For, poststructuralism, even as it proved emancipatory for humanity, continued to ignore the nonhuman world.

Contemporary western ethical thought, with its deep-seated humanist bias, is not conducive to the acceptance of such an ecocritical philosophy which insists on a comprehensive ethics appropriate for a more than human world. Leading continental philosophers of ethics like Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida hardly go beyond humanist framework. Levinas' ethics is grounded on one's responsibility to the other (another human being) who is unknowable and incomprehensible. He, like his contemporaries such as Heidegger and Nietzsche, is suspicious of philosophy, and wants to dismantle philosophy which functions by speaking for the other and by foisting meaning upon them. Levinas considers ethics as preceding and prior to ontology and philosophy, and hence ethics is viewed as unrestrained by any external rules. Ethics, according to Levinas, is deeply concerned with the 'relation' with the other. This relation or encounter with the other, Levinas describes, as "face to face" which is called a

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performative relation. Levinas' ethics is not a codified set of rules and regulations that one ought to obey, but a preontological relation in which one faces rather than speak for the other. Levinas condemns the violence in speaking for or speaking about the other, because it implies an appraisal of the other. For, according to him, one does not philosophize the face of the other, instead, one faces it and speaks to it. As meaning emerges with philosophy, the concern is not for meaning but 'relation' only. Nevertheless, had Levinas' notion of the 'other' included the nonhuman 'other' as well, his ethical philosophy would have become the bedrock for a sound ecocritical position. Unfortunately it has a humanist exclusivity.[2]

Jacques Derrida's ethical position is similar. He begins his book *The Gift of Death* by referring to the Biblical story of Abraham, the patriarch, who was enjoined by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. The book describes God as the tremendous mystery (*mysterium tremendum*) and as wholly other. God, as the wholly other, says Derrida, demands absolute obedience and commands Abraham to transgress the conventional idea of what is ethical. Such absolute responsibility binds Abraham to do something apparently irresponsible and incomprehensible—murdering one's own child. Derrida goes on to stay:

> God as wholly other is to be found everywhere there is something of the wholly Other. And since each one of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary transcendent, non-manifest,. . . then what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation... to every other (one) as every (bit) other. . . in particular my relation to my neighbour or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahway (78).

Derrida argues that every other is to be treated as wholly other (i.e., God-like) and hence every other demands absolute responsibility (i.e. self-sacrifice). The ethics based on nationality, race, class and gender, being unacceptable, he advocates absolute duty towards the other. When one performs one's absolute duty towards an other it is rewarded by God: "thy Father which seeth in secret will reward thee," he says. However, for Derrida, God is far from the conventional, transcendent God of Judeo-Christian tradition which he describes as "idolatrous stereotyping" (108). Instead, remarkably enough, in one stroke, God and conscience merge in Derrida and his concept of God runs strikingly close to the *advaitic* Indian thought:

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> Once such a structure of relation exists, of being-with-oneself. . . Once I have within me. . . a witness that others cannot see and who is therefore at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself, once there is secrecy and secret witnessing within me, then what I call God exists, (there is) what I call God in me (it happens that) I call myself God... God is in me, he is the absolute me[1] or 'self', he is that structure of invisible interiority. . . And he is made manifest. . . when there appears the desire and power to render absolutely invisible and to constitute within oneself a witness of that invisibility" (108-9).

Derrida's position occasions a *deja vu* for those brought up on the mainstream Indian philosophical thought. It appears to be very close to the Brahman-Atman Identity of the vedic tradition. However, it may be seen that Derrida's position with its diehard anthropocentrism, is a far cry from the *Upanishadic* 'That thou art' *(Tat tvam asi)*. Indeed God equals man formula is upheld by Derrida, but not the God equals man equals nonhuman equation, a view that has taken the centre stage down the centuries in the mainstream Indian thought.

An ethical framework genuinely antihumanist at its core, singularizes the dominant Indian tradition which accorded equal status to the human and non-human spheres. Such an egalitarian view was instrumental in engendering a philosophy of immanent monism (*advaita*). Indeed, the rise of the *advaita* philosophy may be traced to the realization that human beings live in a more than human world, characterised by mutual interdependence and more importantly, that any alientation of the two spheres could spell doom for the earth. Incidentally, here is an ethics that precedes philosophy, as Levinas would advocate.

The chief motive for the search for the basic unity underlying the medley of the universe during the vedic period grew from this recognition of interdependence. Simplistic as it may appear, the elements of the macrocosm (universe) were identified there with the faculties, organs, and limbs of the microcosm (human being). For instance, in *Taittiriya Upanishad*, we find that the three elements, earth, fire and water, correspond to the human breath, sight and skin, and again that atmosphere, heaven, four quarters, and the four intermediate quarters on the one hand to wind, sun, moon and stars, and on the other to hearing, mind, speech and touch; while plants, trees, space and one's body are matched by flesh, muscle, bone and marrow (1.7).

There are passages galore in the vedas that warn us against anything

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that stands in the way of the mutual interdependence, be it greed, selfishness or exploitation which finally can turn out to be fatal. In the *Taittiriya Brahmana*, we are told that "the same divine milk that circulates through creatures here on earth lights the suns—all the suns of the galaxy. It condenses also into the forms of the clouds. It pours down as rain and feeds the earth, the vegetation and the animals. The individual with the awareness of this secret cannot be avaricious for any portion of the abundant food that may come to him. He will share it willingly with his companions. He will not wish to break the circuit by hoarding the substance to himself.... His food avails him nothing: when he eats, eats his own death" (2.8.8).

Those aphoristic words from Aruni to his son "That thou art" *(Tat tvam asi)* sum up the entire vedic conception of reality including the nonhuman sphere. *Tat tvam asi* enjoins one to be aware of the identity of one's core essence with the hidden substance of all and everything, and not to be alienated from the nonhuman world.

It may be noted that the poststructuralist thought and the vedic philosophy appear to be talking at cross-purposes here. Whereas the former rejects all essences and stresses difference, the latter upholds one essence and downplays difference. Western antiessentialist postion, destined only to end up in nihilism[3], and an absence of ethical framework, is not conducive to a coexistence of human and nonhuman spheres. The vedic thought moves in the opposite direction, calling for a celebration of the pulsations of life on earth.

A call for a return to the vedic vision, however, is not so much a reactionary backlash towards a spiritualist enterprise or an endorsement of the expansive truth claims of vedic immanent monism as an awareness that religious explanations have a profound bearing on physical well-being and that what is percieved as most vital for survival has a way of emerging spiritually cloaked. Thus, the vedic vision is relevant because, it supports an integral vision that can ensure mutually assured survival of every one in the universe[4]. As ecocritics say, the question is not what is good for man but what is good for everyone. Hence we need an ethics, according to which a thing becomes right only when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community and its surroundings. It is wrong when it tends to do otherwise. For such a holistic worldview, the vedic vision is *par excellence.*

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Notes

1. The antiessentialist view of reality as a process, which often passes for an original contribution of poststructuralism, has long been anticipated in Buddhism and specifically in Nagarjuna.
2. Yet Mathew Calarco and Peter Atterton say "Levinas' ethical theory already implies responsibility towards the other who suffers—be it animal or human—even if Levinas himself was unable or unwilling to draw the full implications of his own thinking: (xx).
3. To steer clear of obvious and inescapable nihilism in poststructualism one is required to apologetically qualify one's position with phrases like "a strategic use of positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" employed by Gayatri Spivak.
4. Lawrence Buell in his book insists on certain features in an ecocritical work, and they appear to have the same tenor:
   "i) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history...
   ii) The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
   iii) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical framework..." (7-8). However, the position does not seem to be adequately supported by an ethical philosophy.

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The Nature-Culture Interface in Andal's *Thiruppavai*

U. Sumathy

"Nature and culture do not exclude each other but be entangled with each other in multiple ways," writes Cheryll Glotfelty in her Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Ecoctiticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture. This essay aims at tracing such symbiotic relationships in Andal's *Thiruppavai*. Though *Thiruppavai* celebrates the penance undertaken by Andal in order to become the divine consort of Lord Krishna, the verses are based on the fundamental premise of man-nature coexistence.

Andal is one among the twelve *Alwars* who comprise the poetic voice of *Vaishnavam*. Written in the '*Pavai*' poetic form, *Thiruppavai* is a collection of thirty verses meant to be sung in the Tamil month of *Margazhi*, which is supposed to be the queen among Tamil months. Andal exhorts the young maidens who are her companions to rise with dawn. Time and again she indicates the hour of the day: "The small hours of the morning-*sitram siru kale*" (29) and also "We are assembled in thine yard/ In the dripping fog—*panith thalai veezha nin vaasar kadai patri*"(12). This custom of early rising which is still followed in the month of *Margazhi* is an ecologically healthy practice as one gets to inhale the ozone rich unpolluted air in that hour. The allied custom of drawing *kolams* in front of the house with rice flour is meant to be a goodwill gesture towards the ants which eat the rice flour.

The wee hours of the morning being the backdrop for the poem, Andal with a keenly observant eye records the magical moments by which night changes into day. Describing the scenery around, she catalogues the flora which includes lotuses and lilies; the fragrant *tulasi* occupies an honoured place. The song of the birds is the dominant sound. Andal

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wakes up the sleeping maidens by referring to the bird song: "Did you not hear the alternate twittering of birds making loud noises-*pullum silambina kaan*"(6), The chirping of black birds of the morn which sounds like a talk between them-*keesu keesu enru aanai chaaththaan kalandhu / pesina pecharavam kettilaiyo*" (7), "The birds are making a lot of sound –*pullum silambina kaan*" (13) and also "The hens are up and are calling / Many sorts of cuckoo birds are singing on top of the trellis-*pandhal mel pal kaal kuyilingal koovina kaan*" (18). While some strains of deep ecology have stressed the need to listen to the nonhuman world, Mircea Elaide points out, "All over the world learning the language of animals, especially of birds, is equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature" (qtd. in Manes 17). There is a tendency to relegate such ideas to the realm of superstition and irrationality but Andal has reiterated the idea in a matter of fact manner by recording the bird sounds in as many as four verses.

The bird song is punctuated with the mooing of cattle and the incessant buzz of the bees. The natural world is perceived as being articulate and it interacts with the humans. These animal sounds go hand in hand with the human sounds—the chanting of the name of 'Hari', the blowing of the conch, the tinkling of pendants and the jingle of the bangles worn by the women when they churn curds—a sonorous reminder of the negotiations between the human and the non-human. This is in sharp contrast to the modern beliefs where nature is thought to be silent and "the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" (Manes 15). In fact, the voice of Andal in conversation with her companions, comes across as a subset of the speaking world.

The pastoral tradition associated with Lord Krishna occasions Andal to imagine herself and her companions as cowherds. They belong to the *Ayarkulam* and they live in *Ayarpadi.* The pastoral imagery which runs as an undercurrent in *Thiruppavai*, not only presents a picture of an ideal, fertile land but also prays for one. Verse three entails such a dream:

> Then world there be at least three rains a month,
> And the red paddy plants would grow big,
> And in their fields would the fish swim and play,
> And the spotted bees after sipping honey,
> To their heart's content,
> Would sleep in the flowers themselves
> And the cows with big udders
> Would fill milk pots to the brim,
> And healthy cows and never diminishing wealth,
> Would fill the country

The same image is repeated in verse 22. In verse 12, it gets slightly modified: the bellowing buffaloes yield milk out of compassion for the crying young

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calves which makes the whole yard swampy with milk. That the life of the cowherds is intermingled with that of the animals is indicated in verse 28 where the cowherds follow the cows and eat after reaching the forest "*Karavaigal pin senru kaanam serndhu unbom*". In such a lifestyle there is no trace of the anthropocentric arrogance or dominating attitude towards nature. Man is here a part of nature, not an exploiter of nature.

Andal shows a selfless all-encompassing concern for the world and fellow creatures which characterizes *Thiruppavai*. Her invocation of rain in Verse Four stands testimony to her selflessness. This verse is a scientific treatise in a miniature form as it narrates the process step by step—from the formation of the dark rain-clouds to the resultant hail and thunder:

> Oh Rain god who comes from the sea,
> Enter the sea and bring water to your fill,
> And with zest and sound take it up,
> And like the god of the deluge become black,
> And shine like the holy wheel
> And rain without stop like the arrow storm
> To make this world happy.

As one probes into the dialectics of animal imagery in *Thiruppavai*, it is seen that animals take demonical as well as divine forms. While there is a mention about demons who took the forms of a stork, a calf and a horse, the valour of Lord Krishna is also explained in terms of animal imagery: "Just like a brave lion sleeping inside a mountain cave comes to his senses, opening his eyes like fire, shaking his mane, bending his body, stretching it into shape and roaring, you please come out," she says. "*maari malai muzhainchil manni kidndhu urangum / seeriya singam arivutru thee vizhithu / veri mayir ponga eppadum perndhu udhari / moori nimirnthu muzhangi purapattu*" (23). This juxtaposing presence of God and devil in the same form indicates the common source from which they have originated.

Cultural connotations abound in *Thiruppavai* which is primarily a reassertion of the concept of togetherness. The solidarity of the maidens, the light banter that characterizes their talk, highlight the need for collective effort. Together they undertake a strict penance and together they rejoice at the end: "All of us together will enjoy- *koodi irundhu kulirndhelo*" (27). Andal makes it clear that the essence of penance is not in renunciation of physical comforts but in leading a disciplined and compassionate life: They will give up ghee, milk, collyrium to the eye and flowers to their hair. More importantly, they will not do any act that is banned, they will not talk ill of anyone, they will give alms and do charity and try to relieve others from sorrow. "*neyyunnom paalunom naatkaale neeraadi / maiyittu*

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ezhudhom malaritth thaam aadhalom / seyyaadhana seyyom theerkkaravai chenrodhom / aiyamum pichaiyum aandhanaiyum kai kaati" (2). Here is a prescription for a universal code of conduct.

"Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is by religion" (White Jr. 9). True to this concept, the elements of nature are conceived in terms of their relation to the Lord in *Thiruppavai*. He is described as the one who measured the three worlds: "*ongi ulaglandha uththaman*"(3). In verse 17 He is shown as the one who split open the sky, became a giant and scaled the world : "*ambaram ooda aruththu ongi ulagu alandha umbar komaane*" (17). In verse 22 the sun and the moon are shown to be His eyes: "*Thingalum aadiththanum ezhundhaar pol / am kan irandum . . .*" The phrase "*aalin ilaiyaay*" in verse 26 evokes the image of Lord Krishna on a banyan leaf during the apocalypse. Reverence to the earth and the other elements is ingrained in this culture though the message is covered in the religious garb.

There is a pointed focus on place and time in *Thiruppavai* which lends itself to ecocritical analysis. Such a reading accentuates a homogenous world where man shares an equivalent relationship with the flora and fauna and Andal in a sweeping stroke covers the entire ecosphere where everything is connected to everything else. It also represents a culture that lives in tune with nature and it is in this medieval culture that man's roots lie.

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Collected Stories by Khushwant Singh, New Delhi, Ravi Dayal/Penguin Viking. Pp. 462, Rs.495

This is a revised, updated edition of the author's earlier compilation published in 1989, with the addition of five new stories that were contained in *Paradise and Other Stories* published in 2005. The compilation shows three distinct styles. Thirty-one of the thirty-two stories in the earlier volume were written during the first phase of creative outburst in the forties and the fifties. He wrote precisely two stories in the seventies, 'The Bottom Pincher' and 'The Agnostic;' the latter neither found a place in the earlier, nor in the present edition. The remaining five had been explicitly written for a new collection in 2005. These are much longer, verbose and meandering narratives punched more with explicit erotica and devoid of style and sensitivity that were characteristic of the author.

He repeats, what he has been on record time and again, in the brief Preface: "Mine are based on real people I got to know well...I look forward to meeting unpleasant people: arrogant, full of self-importance, posers, gasbags, braggarts, name-droppers, hypocrites. I encourage them to talk about themselves. They are never short of words. I put them in different situations, add some *mirch masala* to spice up my stories as I put them on paper....A few of my stories may have been written fifty years ago, but they are still relevant to the present times as they are reflective of the humbug that still thrives in our society."

But he has clearly forgotten what he said two decades earlier, and, therefore, not practiced in subsequent attempts: "A short story in fact be short. It cannot be a short novel, any more than a novel can be a long short story. Just as a large painting needs a larger canvas and is better done in oils than in water colours, and just as a miniature is better done on ivory or parchment and in stone colours with its lines drawn with the precision of a hair brush, so it is in writing. A novel is on a large canvas, a story is like a miniature painting. Personally, I would fix 3500 words as the outside limit for a short story." He does not adhere to the self-professed principle in his latest output. 'Paradise

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runs into twenty-nine pages; 'Life's Horoscope' into forty-three; 'Zora Singh' into twenty-seven; 'Wanted: A Son' into twenty-seven and; 'The Mulberry Tree' into thirty-one pages, respectively. These were ostensibly about "irrationality and self-righteousness" that had come to be a mainstay of the Indian social fibre even while rationality and science brought about a different awakening elsewhere.

He also states in that intro 'On the Short Story' that "a short story must be built around one incident or a series of incidents illustrating one theme or portraying one character or the equation between one character and others." Unfortunately, in the later stories he does not conform to that principle either, nor to "a short story must have a distinct beginning, middle, and end...(and) must have, like a scorpion's sting in its tale, a curlicue which sumps up the story." But it was these very principles that elevated his first thirty-one stories to a pinnacle. They were full of sharp wit, between the lines humour, and the masterly use of the ironic metaphor which, at times, was simply devastating. But they weren't without certain specific concerns and issues: police oppression, injustice in the law courts, political vandalism, corruption, Englishmen, the brown sahibs (described as WOGs), the infiltration of seedy black money and its influence on the political system, Scotch and soda. Recurring incantations throughout the segmented narratives. While the new narratives do roughly touch upon the same obsessions, they are uniformly without the scorpion sting.

Also, not even all the earlier stories are of a uniformly good quality. Some like 'The Interview' and 'Kusum' cannot technically even be called stories at all. Some like 'The Memsahib of Mandala' end on a vague, unclear note expecting too much from the reader. 'Sikh Meets Sikh' and 'Rats and Cats in the House of Culture' are hilarious. 'The Riot' is outstanding. 'Man, How the Government of India is Run' is a beautiful piece of realistic fiction with all the intended pun and sarcasm necessary. Khushwant at his brilliant best. 'A Love Affair in London' makes one feel sad. The underplayed pathos, the irony, the encapsulation of social fibre in 'The Convert', the last specimen of the earlier phase, is spellbinding. 'Mr Kanjoos and the Great Miracle' and 'Maiden Journey of the Jai Hindia' sound more like essays than stories. 'A Bride for the Sahib' is a brilliant comment on ethnic tradition and the legacy of the Raj.

Many of Khushwant's stories are based on 'real people' and incidents. In many of these stories one can spot those faces that at some point or the other brightened up the capital landscape. The knowledge, the peculiarities of them ring funnily in one's mind. "The Butterfly' is one such example. Khushwant is also notorious for his acid pen when it

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comes to obituaries, and the painful social reality in the aftermath of a tragedy. One recollects the occasion when the late Dhiren Bhagat looked mockingly at this tendency and successfully attempted a very convincing essay on the famed author's presumed demise nearly three decades ago. Yet it wasn't even a patch, leave aside an allegorical piece when compared to 'Posthumous', the opening story in both this and the previous compilation.

"It (India) has something no other country in the world has. If I don't find it I'll be back sooner," says Margaret Bloom, "thirty, still single and American" who has been no less a practitioner of the erotic art than her parents, to her High Church Anglican mother with many lovers, divorced by her philanderer Jewish husband in the first story 'Paradise' from the newer lot. By the end, the narrative degenerates into sex and sin, without the expected "scorpion's sting" climax. The same parameters govern the long narratives in 'Zora Singh' (which also deals with the seedy side of politics and rampant corruption; and 'Wanted: A Son', (which has at the centre Hindu middle class morality, and undaunted faith and belief in the divine even if it is through infidelity. 'Life's Horoscope' seems to be inspired by some information, but mostly speculation and deals with blind faith in rituals, astrology, matching of horoscopes and accompanying fears if it is indicated in the chart. "She had looked forward to being married to the only son of a well-to-do family, who was reputed to be a scholar. She also expected him to be an ardent lover...but this fellow had turned out to be a crackpot who did not know the first thing about making love." Predictably, the marriage ends despite matching horoscopes. 'The Mulberry Tree' seems to have been borne of experience and that's why despite the wavering length comes through to some extent. It also deals with faith and miracles.

Devoid of the typical Khushwant characteristics—wit, irony, sarcasm, and humour—these stories can best be described as long, meandering narratives. Disappointing fare from an otherwise master storyteller. But together with the earlier stories the volume is still capable of compelling, to quote the nonagenarian author, "readers to have a look at them."

Suresh Kohli

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Earth Signs by Murali Sivaramakrishnan, Pondicherry, The Creative People, 2006, Pp. 71, Rs. 60

This is Murali Sivaramakrishnan's third volume of poems. He published *Night Heron* in 1998 and *Conversations with Children* (Poems) in 2005. Besides being a poet, Murali is a painter who has already held 12 solo exhibitions in India and abroad, and so this dainty little volume of 37 poems bears testimony of his talent, for he himself has designed the cover and the illustrations of birds and trees to enliven the themes dear to his heart. Murali is a self-professed environmentalist who is deeply concerned about the environmental devastation that is taking place before our eyes in the name of development and progress. Murali teaches English at Pondicherry University and, as a professional critic, he has specialized in Indian aesthetics and literary theory.

One theme that runs through almost all the poems in *Earth Signs* is an agonising sense of loss, a lingering nostalgic pain for what is passing away and an apprehension about the present and the still-born future. The poet uses this contrast as a technique to vividly portray delicate situations and emotions, in poem after poem.

The volume begins with a poem entitled "Absence". Deep and delicate sense of loss is portrayed by juxtaposing nature's beauty and agony of loss.

> Your are not here, but
> the morning comes
> with the golden orioles.

"The golden orioles" and the "still morning", the yellow konnai flowers "against the gray sky" reinforce the same contrast. "Tense breeze" and the "still sky" all point to the depth of silent grief.

You discover another type of startling contrast which the poet presents in "Pleasure of Stinging". Exploring the other side as a technique of relating oneself to the other creatures, insects, birds, beasts, trees, flowers - important earth signs from which we are getting progressively alienated and which the poet-environmentalist grieves over, is presented as a contrast between our reaction to a wasp's sting and the wasp's way of making love.

In "Camouflage," life in varied fluctuations moves on while the poet encloses himself in his "cocoon of kingly wisdom" of dreams— again a contrast. "Only the fool plays on while the wise one sleeps."

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in a beautiful contrast in "Ramblings," which depicts the 'other side':

> A lone crow, they say,
> you see the first thing at dawn,
> brings you ill luck.
> I should ask the crow
> what it thinks about it:
> seeing a lone me the first thing at dawn.

The flow of delicate sympathy to such humble "earth signs" as crow is really remarkable. Unfortunately, the poem then rambles to God and Poet's self and in a way disintegrates.

Then follow a number of poems such as "Poem," "Reprieve," Free Fall", "My Fears" where the poet delves into dreams and fears and depicts these states of mind. But before we turn to the mature poems of social concern, a word about "from the Notebooks of a naturalist," a set of poems about a rat, snakes, an elephant, a magpie robbin, a rat the golden oriole, the leopard, the stray dog and coppersmith etc. They are all descriptive. The acute observations of the poet in evocative language fix these "earth-signs" in their natural habitat reminding us of our insular sensibility which must become inclusive once more. One searches for a Lawrentian touch in these vignettes of birds and beasts but in vain.

One discerns a marked development in Murali's consciousness when one reads his poems of social concern—the ironical handling of different aspects of modern life where a contrast between the value-pattern of the old civilization is juxtaposed with the rapacious economic and political culture of the day, which is depleting natural resources and endangering the existence of human species.

"Grace" deals with the well-known theme of the grace of giving. The poor woman had nothing to give but a great and delicate heart which flowed with instant sympathy for the innocent little boy. "The Return of the Bats," has a Frostian touch. Most of these poems recall the poet's experience in childhood and nostalgic regret makes them poignant and touching. "Suppaiyyan" and "A Boy and his Violin" are memorable human documents. In "A Boy and his Violin," the poet is concerned about the contemporary reality:

> Surely we have come in rough times, untidy days
> that compelled no involvement, indifferent like
> ticketless travellers. No more news of lovers' suicides.

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> Here son and father plot for each other's deaths, even mother's anguish conspires but to digress into new strategies of illicit gain-surely, friend, we have no part here, you and I who have taken on the lifeless looks of the Buddha on the wall.
>
> Needless deaths, bloody violations of the flesh - gory happenings - brother killing brother in the casual comedies
> of those politicicing bastards. Where do we fit in?

The contrast between "rough times, untidy days" and "where do we fit in?" sustains the tension in the poem which ends on the Frostian note, "Things are never what they seem to be."

This theme of "rough times" is carried forward in another important poems. In "Moon Rise" "The river bed flounders below the reddening skies. "The life of the river is dwindling. The old river is dying. The river is the symbol of old civilization:

> Not so long ago
> the river was full and mighty. Days and nights were filled with laughter and the bustle of living.
> Children played and sang while the women washed clothes.
> Men punted across on long, narrow boats. Was that so long ago?

Contrast it with :

> Three more girls were gangraped yesterday
> One had her entrails gored out in the struggle.
> ... ...
> We have entered the *postmodern*. Here is virtual reality made palpable and palatable - complete with the thrill of iced fantasies.

Then "Buddha's smile reverberates" and the poem ends with the hope "Quite soon / we'll all awaken to the silence of her dreams."

The anguish of the poet about disjointed times and the deep sense of loss is carried forward in a number of other poems such as "Nights of the Round Table", "Uncertainties", "The Ghost in the Room," and others.

Murali Sivaramakrishnan as an intellectual is concerned not only about

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the wholeness of our natural habitat, but also equally with the socio-political and cultural environment in which we exist today.

Reading *Earth Signs* has been a delightful experience. This is definitely a substantial achievement of the poet.

B.M. Bhalla

The Desire of Root by Robin S. Ngangom, Cuttack, Chandrabhaga, 2006, Pp. 96, Rs.125

When one considers the term "Indian poetry," one is confronted by the vexed question, into which I do not wish to go, of what constitutes this "Indianness". But, by neglecting to bring into its fold much poetry of value that is being written and published by the diverse ethnic groups in India's North-east, one perpetuates the folly of the mainland politicians to further estrange the people of the region. True, some attempt has been made over the last one decade or so to include and discuss the works of Robin S Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Mamang Dai, Yumlembam Ibomcha, Thangjam Ibopishak, Kynpham S. Nongkyrnyh in anthologies and academic forums. But their relative obscurity as against the ubiquity of poets of dubious merit in high profile cultural events and in Page 3 circles has meant that the latter masquerade as the new and young Indian English poets ready to take over from the older generation of poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, AK Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Adil Jussawala and so on. Ironically enough, many of these new poets from Manipur, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh have been "discovered" by the older generation of poets such as Jayanta Mahapatra, and Adil Jussawala and praised in their reviews and lectures. In one of his earlier essays on Indian Poetry, for example, Jayanta Mahapatra mentions Robin while noting how Indian poetry in English underwent a sea-change and also a dramatic re-evaluation in the 1970s: "It was the native culture that was showing in the poem of the Indian English poet," instead of the earlier tendency to write a well-crafted poem, or a kind of poetry that was notable for its dry wit and irony.

Appropriately enough, Robin, who is a Meitei from Manipur dedicated his first collection *Words and the Silence* (Writers Workshop, 1988) to Jayanta Mahapatra. Reviewers like Makarand Paranjape were immediately

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struck by the genuineness of his poetry, and called it the "poetry of a quiet intensity and unhurried melody." His second volume *Time's Crossroads* (Orient Longman, 1994) was preceded by some well-deserved recognition, and some of his poems were included in Paranjape's *New Indian Poetry* in English, where Kharmawphlang kept him company. Armed with a blurb by Jayanta Mahapatra, the second collection earned the best compliment from Adil Jussawalla. In a review, the latter points out that "part of Ngangom's charm is the fascination of distance." His more astute remarks are: (i) there's his special mix of Khasi and Meitei myths, Chinese poetics and plain adolescent lust; and (ii) Ngangom is one of the few poets who can write well on both politics and love and not be afraid of showing their links" (Jussawalla).

Reviewing Robin's early works in 1997 (*Indian Literature),* I had remarked that his third collection was overdue. But it took him nearly ten years or more to bring out the third and by far his best volume of poetry *(DR)* which shows his growth and the maturation of his undoubted talent. Some of his poems here had earlier been published in *Kunapipi* and the *New Statesman,* of which the most ambitious is the longish, "The Strange Case of Robin S. Ngangom." Belonging to the second part of the book under review with the subheading "Subject and Objects," (the first part is called "The Book of Lusts") this poem is a reflection on the subject's relationship with one of the "objects" called Manipur. But the relationship quickly grows beyond the deep subjectivity of "I misplaced a bronze bell" [emblematic of his cultural identity] /somewhere..." to "our intentions" and "our past." So that by the time the poem ends, the "strange case" of Robin S Ngngom does not appear strange or unique after all. His is the plight of many or most Manipuris of his generation: "But where can one run from the homeland...?" One is greeted by some amazing phrases: "We sowed suspicion in the fields./ Hatred sprang and razed the crops" But such immaculate phrasing is more a rule than an exception in Robin's inspired artistry. All through the book Robin keeps springing surprises, his way with words match the turn of emotions. The anger of his early works has given way to meditative poise. But, as in his first two collections, here too he is keenly aware of the ethnic clashes in his homeland, the dubious cause of the "freedom fighters", the human rights violation on the part of both these and the Indian army, and the rampant corruption among the Manipuris themselves. Thus irony has emerged as his main rhetorical tool:

> Patriotism is the need of the hour.
> Patriotism is preaching succession
> and mourning our merger with a nation.

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Patriotism is honouring martyrs
who died in confusion,
patriotism is declaring we should
preserve native customs traditions,
our literature and performing arts,
and inflicting them on hapless peoples.
Patriotism is admiring the youth who fondles grenades....

Robin's poetry here in the volume is, as the title suggests, deeply passionate, where the love of the land inextricably merges with the love of the flesh. The passion behind the poetry is indicated not only in the dedication, "To my parents who in making love also made poetry," but also in the two epigraphs taken from Rilke and Neruda. In fact, Robin's poetry is deeply indebted to the Latin American and Caribbean as well as African poetry, and strives to eschew the Anglo-American modernism that the earlier generation of Indian poets succumbed to. His heart bleeds as much for his homeland, as for its people, as much for his beloved. The sad songs he sings whether of the death of the "booze artist Pacha"-turned- "lunatic Pacha," or of missing his earlier companion Desmond, tell us of the range of themes that are available to the poets of the North-East, something that the run-of-the mill Indian English poet simply does not have. If we do not read the works of poets like Robin, Desmond or Mamang Dai we shall continue to privilege Indian English fiction over its poor cousin, Indian English poetry. No wonder one hardly, if ever, comes across poetry volumes in the book fair stalls.

Sumanyu Satpathy

The Suragi Tree by Prabhakar Acharya, Mapinlit; 2007, Pp. 452

Every individual has at least one story, the story of his or her own life, within one's own self, waiting to be explored and expressed. Some do it at an early age and then move on to other works of creativity/criticism. Some delve within their own selves when they are well past their prime, when they have the time and have developed the inclination to do so. Others never do it all and the seed of creativity dies unexplored within them. Prabhakar Acharya seems to belong to the second category, judging from the brief bio-data at the end of the book under review. *The Suragi*

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Tree is his first published novel and, like most first novels, appears to be extensively autobiographical, with an element of fantasy and nostalgia that is bound to creep into works when one looks back at one's youth and childhood, well aware that nothing will bring thus back. Though Acharya's Preface to the novel opens with the sentence, "I wouldn't have written this novel if Harish, my nephew, hadn't given me for my sixtieth birthday, a Home Publishing System; and if I hadn't used up all the ink in a fortnight, writing letters and taking several printouts of a circular;" a discriminating reader would see at once that to get to know the actual purpose, one has to delve much deeper into the novelist's psyche.

The novel is divided into eight parts, each dwelling on a particular period in the protgaonist's life, detailing the incidents, relationships and other things he considers worthwhile during that period. The parts are strung together loosely, the common link being the narrator/protagonist and the suragi tree under which he sat and read novels when young. This reviewer wondered at first what a suragi tree is called in the north as the writer does not provide a glossary. After some time one realizes that the name does not matter. It could be any tree with sweet-smelling flowers occupying a privileged position and offering shelter not only to birds but maybe some spirits locally called deivas or kalkutias, who get angry easily and need appeasing. The suragi tree, one feels, stands for certain values that the narrator has grown up with, a certain pace of life in keeping with the almost sylvan surroundings. With the passage of time values change, life becomes faster and no one believes in spirits anymore. This explains the casual, almost callous, way in which the narrator's younger brother tells him about his plan of cutting down the tree. To quote, "I also want to get rid of that...nuisance. I want to cut down the suragi tree." The detailed description of the cutting down of the suragi tree, the way in which it is wrenched from its roots, touches the reader and one can imagine that the cry heard by the characters is a dying cry of the tree or a cry of pain from one of the spirits living in the tree. Ironically, before he leaves the village on that occasion, Sudhakar is presented with a portrait of his mother (who had passed away some time back) as a young person, her head covered with a garland of suragi flowers. The cutting down of the suragi tree denotes the end of an era and modernization with all kinds of changes, not necessarily for the better. The new house built by Sudhakar's brother Moni looks imposing but it is not at all comfortable. To quote, "The cutting of the suragi tree made one important difference to my life. I did not want to go home. Staying in Moni's new house, somehow became repugnant. I went

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to Kantheshwar just once, to attend Moni's wedding." It seems the narrator has lost his own roots with the cutting of the tree and cannot relate to places that were once familiar to him.

But nature does not like a vacuum and Sudhakar finds love and affection in Urmi and Harshad, two small children who live in the flat below his, in Mumbai. In Kantheshwar a sapling sprouts where the suragi tree had been, though Moni does not like it and threatens to cut it down. Does that mean one cannot sever one's roots howsoever hard one might try? Possibly this applies to some persons like Sudhakar; others like his brother Moni do not hesitate to erase the past if it is in conflict with their self-interest.

As one finishes reading *The Suragi Tree*, one is appreciative of its lilt, the Bildungsroman of its central character, the insight it offers into life in a Karnataka village which gets urbanized slowly, highlighting of local traditions like Yakshagana and Kodi which the north Indian reader is a stranger to, among other things. However, one feels that the novel could have been trimmed a bit without harming its basic structure and features. For example, Sudhakar's affair with Dakshi need not have been taken up in such detail. There are many other sub-plots in the novel which could have been trimmed as they are digressive.

From this reviewer's reading of the book, it appears that the suragi tree and the narrator's relationship with it is the central theme of the novel. One feels therefore that all the characters and incidents associated with the tree in the novel should have been foregrounded. Lakshmi, the nurse who looks after the narrator when he is down with chickenpox, is one such character. The way she nurses him and looks after the plants, reviving them, suggests a strong link with nature and this is confirmed when a sapling of the suragi tree comes up where she usually washed her feet, after she had gone. Looking at all this, one feels that the author has dismissed her rather casually. However, on the whole, one would enjoy reading the book though it is a bit too long. There is a disarming simplicity about it that one remembers much after one has finished reading it, along with an overwhelming presence of the suragi tree.

Purabi Panwar

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The Birth of the Maitreya by Bani Basu, translated from Bengali by Sipra Bhattacharya, Kolkata, Stree, Pp.508, Rs.300.

It is a huge tome indeed, with a profusion of characters and events dotting the five hundred pages in small print, replete with ideas in the making and ideals in haze, popular rejoicings, prolonged keening, armed conflicts and contretemps. Persons of all conceivable hues and shades appear, reappear and disappear, all the while entrusting the dear reader with the unenviable task of keeping track of all that has happened with them. They might not have blazoned the pages of history but their roles cannot be ignored. And if your memory is like a sieve, you are done for. But, it is worthwhile making the extra effort to retain mentally whatever you go through, so as to be able to return to the plot in the making, branching out in different directions in a continuous process before the expected denouement. For, relishing the finesse is, undoubtedly, a pleasurable experience.

Action there is aplenty, not always without motivation, involving love, sex, violence, retribution, humans eating humans, wars, strategic alliances and bitter feuds for territorial supremacy, espionage, mayhem, homicide, patricide, diplomacy and statecraft. Straddling above everything is the gentle colossus with his message of compassion, love, peace and harmony: the great Tathagata. It is fiction in a selective historical setting. Obviously, therefore, all is not history just as everything is not fiction.

Fact and fiction have been admirably mingled into a literary outpouring of multilayered magnitude. It was the time of Magadha in its heyday, of Bimbisara and Ajatashatru, the latter eventually murdering the former, his father, to seize power in a nasty political game. The Muslim invasion of India from the north-western corridors was then not even a smudge on the distant horizon. The Bimbisara-Ajatashatru episodes have been poignantly depicted. The latter was impatient to get the throne and had no hesitation in killing his father even after imprisoning him and denying him food. Bimbisara's soliloquy, in the dark prison, with only one window, brings out the pathos and the irony of the whole situation.

'Who am I? And what is the truth?' He mused. 'Have mercy on me, Lord. Let your miraculous grace shower down upon the life of Bimbisara, who has become futile, ravaged! What great injustice! What unpardonable sin! How can he who is born of me, confine his affectionate father in prison? Starve him to death? Search his mother's robes? What karma gave birth to this unsuccessful father, this failed monarch, O Lord!'

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As he looked out of the solitary window he saw Tathagata, like a 'beacon of light amidst absolute darkness.' Bimbisara concluded that his suffering was the result of his karma. No power on earth, not even Tathagata, could bring a change. This 'heart-rending lesson in the theory of karma is the final revelation in the life of Bimbisara.'

It emerged as a common perception that the powerful Bimbisara became less effective as a ruler after he came under the Buddhist spell though he did not join the Buddhist order, an impression that was exploited to the hilt by the barefaced Ajatashatru. In an ironical twist, it was Bimbisara who had, at one stage earlier, raised the crucial issue as to how beneficial were the discourses and sermons to the society when the soldiers, who were bound by the duty to protect his subjects, were inclined to join the monastic order en masse. What would happen to his kingdom, to his subjects? Who would protect them and maintain law and order? The Buddha tried to clarify thus, 'O king, man is bound in chains everywhere. Bound by life. Bound by tradition, by society, by family. Everywhere he faces threats to his freedom. But the right to take the Holy Vows is the only one which no one can deprive him of.'

The king then asked if he retired from the world to join the Holy Order would that be doing justice to the citizens of Magadha? 'But you have the right to do so, O king!' replied the Buddha. 'Leave aside the right, my sense of responsibility to the state of Magadha forbids me to accept monkhood!' The Buddha averred, 'Perhaps complete detachment has not yet taken possession of your mind.' When the king persisted in arguing that the soldiers, enamoured of monkhood, want to escape from action to avoid risking their life, on the battlefield, the Buddha remarked, 'All right, let it be as you say. The soldiers will not be allowed to join the Sangha.' It was concluded that there should be a 'balance between the way of Lord Tathagata and the path of royal duty.' But the uprising engineered by Ajatashatru and the chaos that followed, culminating in the royal assassination, leaves enough doubt whether a fine balance could indeed be maintained. As Nandiya wondered, how the man who could control the savagery of Angulimala could not prevent the patricide!

A somewhat similar predicament was sensed at the time of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda much later. The question arose as to which aim is more important: salvation of the self or service to society? Swami Vivekananda resolved the apparent conflict by creating two institutions in the monastic order viz., one to concentrate on the worship of God and the other to render service to humanity in the form of educational establishments, charitable hospitals and the like—the former

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broadly covered by the 'Ramakrishna Muth' and the latter by the 'Ramakrishna Mission'.

The Buddha, in the closing phase, said, 'I have remained alive for eighty long years — for the welfare of the many... What you know today of the true Dhamma, was not the result of a momentary illumination. I built it up day-by-day, bit-by-bit... O Ananda! When after five thousand years, the influence of this true Dhamma will have vanished without a trace, another Buddha will appear — the Maitreya.' The messiah whose advent was predicted by the Buddha is still awaited. Perhaps it is meant to symbolize an age of spiritual enlightenment on the lines of the Buddha's aspirations when there would be no injustice and oppression.

While it would be a tall order to always expect a literary ambrosia chiselled from the facets of a bygone era, the reputed author and the translator have made a commendable effort at creative fruition while focusing on a crucial phase of history. The glossary at the end is useful. But an index would have been a great aid in a work of this magnitude.

M.N. Chatterjee

The Star Arundhati translated by Rupalee Burke from Gujarati *Arundhati no Taro* by Usha Upadhyay, Ahmedabad, Flamingo Publications, 2006, Pp. 52, Rs.50

When society will have a new Samhita,
the star Arundhati, dimly shining
like Ravji's backyard
at the end of the Saptarshi constellation,
will blossom like a butmogra
gleaming radiantly....

Thus ends the poem 'Liberation', one of the twenty-five in the slim collection. Explaining the significance of Arundhati as a star in the Saptarshi constellation, the poet says that as a child she had been prompted to ask her father is Arundhati 'small and dim' if the other stars of the Saptarshi are so 'luminous', why. As a woman the poet seems to identify with Arundhati and says that she has still not found an answer. 'A woman's search for that answer - that is my honest voice,' she says about some of the poems in this collection. Reading this poem, one feels that although

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she may not have found 'the' answer to her search, she pins her hope on the day when Arundhati will blossom under a new social system.

While some poems in the collection reflect the poet's 'feminist' concerns, some others reflect her keen eye for Nature and its varied manifestations. Most of the poems are short and by and large straightforward in expression. This has enabled Rupalee Burke to translate them with great felicity keeping the intention and sentiment of the poet intact.

Poems like 'Severed Wings', 'Tale', 'Spittoon', specially show how strongly the poet feels about the subjugation of women. In 'Tale' she uses the vivid image of a blade of grass buried under a rock to express the subjugation of women. The last line: 'How impudently sinful!' shows how by exercising the privilege of a translator to move away from literalness, where necessary, Rupalee brings out the suppressed anger of the poet. Using the 'Spittoon' as a symbol for the exploitation of women, the poet condemns patriarchy and portrays the harm done to womankind by resorting to the deification and commodification of women in one breath. In 'Severed Wings' she doubts whether the blindfold on the eyes of the Goddess of Justice will ever be removed and yet reading between the lines, one wonders whether like she does in the poem 'Liberation' she is hoping for a better future - dim though the hope is.

However, her anger against patriarchy hasn't dimmed her love for Nature in all its varied manifestations. Among this group of poems 'The Sun', 'Rain Pictures' and 'The Wind' read well. Lines like:

> ... the weary sun
> was about to leap into the sea
> when it saw a child's
> delicately playful footprint
> on the sandy beach
> and suddenly
> it stood still on the horizon. (The Sun)

or

> Someone stop it,
> please stop it!
> Wearing anklets of
> rustling leaves,
> the brisk Sharada wind
> runs with a jingling sound
> and stirs up in the blood
> the music of dance, (The Wind)

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remind one of the romantic poets of the West. Each of the six Rain-pictures is delicately conceived and expressed, making them pictures in words.

The memory of the communal riots in Gujarat has stirred the sensitivity of many a committed artist. Usha Upadhyay is no exception. She mourns the havoc these riots have caused to her city in some of her poems. Enlarging the meaning of kohl which is conventionally applied to the eyes of a newborn on its Chatthi the poet laments:

> Today at twilight
> I wonder as I see
> the houses of my city
> burnt black by fire,
> for whose Chatthi
> must have so much kohl
> been made? (Kohl)

In 'Camel', although apparently the poet describes how an earthquake completely shatters a placid life by its violent impact, the latter part of the poem could also be interpreted as the expression of the poet's anguish and shock which the violent communal holocaust of Gujarat caused its soil to shake to its very roots. The poem brings out the deft handling of the image of the 'trumpeting' camel "bearing a cemetery on its back.'

> In the air now floats
> a vulture-like obnoxious stench of corpses.
> As twilight thickens,
> standing between the hillocks,
> yellow peepul leaves
> count the funeral pyres.
> With dishevelled hair,
> distraught face,
> watching the city's broken pearl necklace
> the dazed earth is still quivering.

Upadhyay's poetic landscape, however, appears limited. This is what one gathers from this collection - this maybe due to the small number of short poems included. The absence of a distinct voice makes it difficult for the reader to put her under a label. Therefore, the claim Rupalee Burke makes in her Preface that her translation will help the poems to emerge from their 'regional existence' to an 'inter-regional' and 'international existence' is rather tall. This is not to take away from the quality of the poems or the merit of the translation which is smooth and most

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of the time linguistically sound. It will bring the non-Gujarati reader closer to the work of a Gujarati poet which is what a translation is expected to do.

The Star Arundhati is artistically laid-out and elegantly produced.

Amina Amin

That's OK Tammanna and Other Reveries by J.Bhagyalakshmi, Alok Parva Prakashan, 2007; Pp. 176. Rs. 350

One setback that plagued the newspapers in recent years is the disappearance of middles. Crisp and racy, often gossiping over a topical issue, the middles held out a pleasant relief to the readers breaking the monolithic seriousness of the edit page. These middles had a lively origin in the essays of Addison and Steele. A number of writers who rose on the ladder of literary success drew upon the style of such master craftsmen of English prose. Addison wrote (earlier in *The Tatler* and later in *The Spectator*) in a style called the 'Middle style', neither lefty nor plunging into trivia. It is debatable if the middles lost the vogue in the laissez faire economy due to wilting punch or the derivativeness inspite of all historical attractions of mass appeal.

J. Bhagyalakshmi rekindles the interest in the middles in her readers offering them as many as eighty middles in her book, *That's OK Tammanna and Other Reveries*. In each middle her protagonist ushers in with a quaint idea and engages the author in a discussion which on the face of it may sound a trifle simplistic but as the narrative proceeds it turns out as an exciting subject. The protagonist in all the middles is Seenu who seems to appear as Shakespeare's wise fool giving out a valid reason in his argument which cannot be just dismissed as tomfoolery. In the middle titled, "Writer, Journalist and Critic," Seenu declares he wants to be a middle writer for a newspaper and presents a critique of the middle maintaining that there is no need for any theme or subject to write a middle. He argues, "Theme is for a poem. Plot is for a drama. Subject is for an article and my dear, nothing is for a newspaper middle." "He even lets the author wonder if the middles come under the category of journalism. After a month when seenu appears with his letter to the

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editor published in a newspaper, he flourishes his letter pad printed, "Srinivas, writer, journalist and critic."

The author informs in her preface, "Dialogue predominates in almost all the pieces." There are a few exceptions in about half a dozen middles where the author writes in direct narration as in "When They are Poor" or "Begging a Question". These offer a broader eyeview to the style of her prose:

> "Its Banner of entering also is very dramatic; first, it perches on the nearby electric pole and caws. From there it comes down to the neem branch touching the balcony. Having warned all and sundry, it perches on the parapet and lets out a full throated cawing. Then there is silence for a while."
>
> ("Cawing and Crowing")

Using the dialogues in her middles which is rather a conversational style, the author seeks to portray objectively the spectacle of life around. It is a very effective technique which, bringing home the living speech, enables the author present her subject in a dramatic narrative. Notably, the conversational style has a long tradition in Indian literature which dates back to the famous conversation of Pururava and Urvashi rendered in the Tenth Mandala of *Rigveda*. In the title piece, "That's OK Tammanna", the latter gives voice to the general understanding of the artists and the writers. For Tammanna, it is plain as a pike-staff that artists are artists and the writers are writers. The author's plea that literature is one of the fine arts does not convince him. He instead points out that if the writers were the artists, then how could they get Jnanpith award. Incidentally, in the Indian context we have as many as sixty-four arts and even burglary is considered one of the arts as stated in *Kamsutra*.

The author explores a wide variety of subjects and gives her view of the accessible and the familiar whether it is in "Spiritual Blackmail" or in "Boss Is Always Right" or even in "To be or not to be." While the piece, "The Hungry can Wait" showcases a comment on nepotism in private organisations, the "Rules are Rules" demonstrates the scenario where power turns the head. In some middles the author draws her reader to the crucible of options and leaves him there to find resolution to the dilemma. "No Holds Barred" is a tender satire on the authors who undertake to write their autobiographies glorifying themselves for the virtues they never had. Says Seenu to the author:

"Why, there are some writers, rather beginners, who are publishing their biographies and perhaps selling them well."

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"That way anyone can write an autobiography."

"That is what I am saying, and I can write whatever I want."

"That you can't do," I protested.

"Oh, I can very well do," he answered. "To start with I can say I was born in an aeroplane."

"But it is not true!"

"You think someone will contradict it?" and Seenu goes on to add at length that he stood first in the university and spent half his life helping the poor though his project finally lands in cold storage. In such references, the author gets to the heart of the malady whether social, moral or literary. It is realistic and plausible just as the roaming cows and recruitment tamasha in "Explaining Delhi."

For her warm imagination and strong sensibility, Bhagyalakshmi succeeds to hold her readers in her gripping pages. Brisk and bouncy, these middles amply entertain the readers and offer a graphic picture of Indian life and psyche.

Manohar Bandopadhyay

Pursuit of Meaning by Rakshat Puri, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers (Pvt.) Ltd. 2006, Library Edition, Pp. 188, Rs.300

Pursuit of Meaning by Rakshat Puri is a collection of poems from six selections of poetry by the poet published after 1995, namely *The Hallucination of Words; Edge; Wordoodles; Verse Inverse; The Sun was Young;* and *Dreams Map life*. Most of the poems in this selection had appeared in various magazines and anthologies, in and outside India. They have won much critical acclaim.

The poems in *Pursuit of Meaning* encapsulate an all-encompassing vision of man's fragile and splintered existence in a universe void of meaning, a universe where the guest for meaning ends up being a guest for 'uncertain certainties'. History, mythology, the chronological sequence in this universe are all caught up in an inextricable web of flux. The poet, relentless in his search for the roots of his being and wistful in his compelling nostalgia, is filled with uncomprehending awe in the face of a universe where being and not being, sound and soundlessness, becoming and not becoming, the past, present and the future merge and

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blend in an ineluctable, irreversible process. Through the poems runs an overwhelming sense of time winding and unwinding in a maze as it were, of action 're-played, re-heard, recalled' and of irretrievable loss. The poet's powers of depicting evocative landscapes to convey his moods and a dream-wrapped, sorrow-laden ambience are remarkable. In poem after poem, he gives poignant expression to the urgency of his quest for what turns out to be unattainable, to his helplessness, and to the profound ennui of his angst-ridden soul in poem after poem. There is a *Wasteland*-like ambience of arid despair, of sombre gloom, of doubts and fears and of deep disquiet. Bleak despair, however, is not the final message the poet seeks to get across to us. He struggles through to a realization, Wordsworth-like, of memory providing an emotional refuge, albeit temporary. The tramp in the poem, "A Tramp's Wordoodles" is symbolic of the poet himself. The poet says:

' ....The mind goes home
To memory, goes home to nostalgia.
The tramp flounders in the poetic spiral,
In the passing moment of passing poetry
The *is* and the *was* in a succession
of experiential awareness.
In the unknowing, beyond form, beyond sound.
Beyond meaning in words, meaning outside words.....
Intangible, undefined, ungraspable, slipping away
forever almost felt, touched, grazed, never held,
The tramp pursues felt, touched, grazed, never held,
The tramp pursues, poetry, pursues the mind
Going home to memory.'

The image of the tramp is a recurrent image in *Pursuit of Meaning*. The tramp is restless wandering 'homeless still, since the night he fled' ("Now Homeless", page 103). He, like man in general,

'paces counting images of love,
Of passage, of faith
Frail in the grief of cyclic certainties
Of argument from retreat to reverse
To retreat,
Locked in a sense of coming and going
For some unknown why and what and when.'

("Prisoner," page 99). Like memory, dreams provide a stay. The poem, the poet tells us, moves on 'through words and meanings,/ That snake past grey frames/Restructured for elusive empyrean dreams.'

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Even as Rakshat Puri seeks to chart the soul's journey across the realm of knowing and unknowing and metaphysical speculations, he shows a keen sense of socio-political realism and a satirical perception of the harsh realities of the contemporary scenario. In the poem "Bureaucrat" (page 118), in terse lines he etches the picture of a tanned bureaucrat moving 'paper men in their files/Placed in aged racks./' with unvarying 'iceberg courtesy'. The poems "Political Theatre-I" and "Political Theatre-II" (pages 31-32) are powerful in their telling but retained critique of politicians. The poems "August 1947" (page 87) expresses the poet's agony at the truncation of the Indian subcontinent as well as his indignation at the alien rulers' 'rule of conquest/In hard-structured wealth-extraction.' The poem "Evening Song" (page 51). "The Wind," (page 52), "Moving" (page 53) are arresting in their evocation of bygone times lost beyond recall. Indeed, the poems, by and large, stand out in their emotive appeal, evocative imagery and last but not least, in their elegant lyrical grace. We have good reasons to believe that readers will relish reading this collection of poems and admire the poet's acute sensitivity to the existential predicament facing man, his deep perceptiveness of the beauties of nature in all her evanescent glory, his grasp of technique and his vision of man as trapped in the uncertainties of a precarious existence, and struggling to find light at the end of the tunnel.

Satiprasad Maiti

❑

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Our Contributors

Abraham, T.J. Working as Reader, Dept. of English, St. Thomas College, Pala 686 574, Kottayam (Dt.), Kerala.

Ahmad, Syed Kabeer. Translates from Urdu into English. Add: 143/A, Gayathri, Southern Railway Colony, Sternling Road, Nungambakkam, Chennai 600 034.

Alam, Khursheed. Writes stories in Urdu. Add: F-58, Sector 40, NOIDA 201 301

Allama Iqbal ('Sir Mohammad Iqbal' 1877-1938) Celebrated Urdu poet, philosopher and politician; best known for his poetic works, including *Asrar-e-Khudi, Rumuz-e-Bekhudi, Payam-I-Mashriq, Zarb-I-Kalim, Pas Chih Bayad Kard, Armaghan-I-Hijaz,* and *Bang-e-Dara.* Author of the patriotic song, 'Saare Jahan se Achha...'

Amina Amin. Critic and book-reviewer. Add: C/4 Jasmine, Khanpur, Ahmedabad 380 001

Ayothi, V. Add: Translates from Tamil into English. Add: Bharathidasan University, Palkalaiperur, Tiruchirapalli 620 024.

Baba Farid (1173-1266) Sufi saint of Punjab; recognized as the first acclaimed poet of Punjabi language and is considered one of the highest, holiest and most pivotal saints in Sikhism, his verses are collected and compiled in the holy *Guru Granth Sahib* under the chapter *Farid's Sayings* by Guru Nanak.

Balakrishnan, Vimala. Translates from Tamil into English. Add: 111 SFS Flats, Gulmohar Enclave, New Delhi 110 049.

Bandopadhyay, Manohar (b.1944) Poet and critic writing in Hindi and English; has several published works like *Mouthful of Metaphors* (poetry), *Prem Chand—Life and Works* (biography), *Antaral Ke Beech* (poetry collection in Hindi) etc.; recipient of Munshi Prem Chand Award, Ministry of Education Award (twice) etc. Add: Flat No. 6119/5, Sector D 6, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110 070.

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Banerjee, Subrata. Visiting Professor at Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Dvelopment, Chandigarh. Add: C/o Mr. J.P. Singh, Keota Latbagan, Sahaganj, Hooghly 712 104

Barua, Parbati Prasad. Wrote poetry in Assamese. Names and address of legal heirs are: Smt. Santvana Barooah, Smt. Bandana Hazarika, Sri Pranabai Ram Baruva, Smt. Kalpana Borkakoti, Sri Manabi Ram Baruva, Sri Bharabi Ram Baruva, Smt. Arpana Dutta, 29 Lakhimi Path, R.G. Baruah Road, Guwahati 781 024.

Basu, Subrata. Translates from Bengali into English. Add: W 2C 10/2 Phase II, Golf Green Complex, Kolkata 700 095.

Baswani, Ravi. Translates from Hindi into English. Add: 103, Nityanand, Seven Bungalows, Andheri (West), Bombay 400 053.

Bhalla, B.M. Critic, poet, translator and educationist; has done critical work on D.H. Lawrence, American novel, drama and Indian literature; his translations include Shiv Kumar Batalvi's verse-play *Luna*, Betty Smith's novel *Joy In the Morning* into Urdu, P.C. Chunder's novel *Samar Garal Khundnan* and Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Durgesh Nandini* into English. Add: G-102, Saket, New Delhi 110 017.

Bhattacharjee, Anupam. Translates from Bengali into English. Add: Flat-Y/3, Cluster-3, Purbachal Housing Estate, Salt Lake, Sector – 3, Block – GA, Kolkata 700 097

Chakrabarti, Parthasarathi. Translates from Bengali into English. Add: 11/2, 3R, Purbachal Phase II, Sector – 3, Salt Lake City, Kolkata 700 097.

Chakrabarti, Shyamal. Translates from Bengali into English. Add: Department of Physics, IIT, Kharagpur 721 302

Chatterjee, M.N.: Freelance writer and critic. Add: 202 Jaijaiwanti, Asiatic Enclave, Vartak Nagar, Thane (W) 400 606, Maharashtra.

Chatterji, Shoma A. Freelance journalist, author and researcher, translates from Bengali into English. Add: 109/ 33, Hazra Road, Calcutta 700 026

Chattopadhyay, Saratchandra (1876-1938) Bengali novelist; wrote 30 novels and a number of short stories; his works are full of passionate sympathy for the oppressed and the weak; *Srikanta* and *Grihadaha* are his masterpieces and *Charitraheen* the most discussed of his novels; his novels and short stories are translated into almost all Indian languages and a few into English and other European languages. Characters of his novels became

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household names throughout India and almost all his novels have been made into famous movies.

Das, Jibanananda (1899-1954) Hailed as the most outstanding and authentic Bengali poet of the post-Tagore era who could, with his originality, overcome the impact of Rabindranath and easily evolve a poetic idiom which was at once traditional and strikingly new; also a pathbreaking critic; has nine volumes of poetry including the most noted *Banalata Sen*, *Rupasi Bangla* etc; his *Jibananda Daser Shreshta Kavita* got the Sahitya Akademi Award (1955) posthumously.

Das, Joysree. Add: Lecturer in English, Sree Agrasen Mahavidyalay, Dalkhola, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal 733 201

Das, Paromita. Translates from Assamese into English. Add: 16 Pub Sarania, P.O. Silphukhuri, Guwahati 781 003, Assam.

Gopi, N. (b. 1948). Telugu poet and literary critic of great repute; his chief poetic works include *Tangedoopulu* (1976), *Mylurayi* (1983), *Chitra Deepalu* (1989), *Kalaanni Nidraponivvanu* (1998); has also authored a travelogue –*Nenu Choosina Mauritius* in 1996. Address: H. No. 13-1/5B, Srinivasapuram, Ramanthpur, Hyederabad –500013, Andhra Pradesh.

Goswami, Joy (b. 1954) Bengali poet and novelist; has more than 20 published works, which include *Pratnajib, BhutumBhagaban* (poetry), *Manoramer Upanyas, Sei Sab Seyalera Jara Brishtite Bhijechhila* (novels) etc.

Indra, Sheela. Writes stories in Hindi. Add: G-57, Giri Kunj Housing Society, Sector 8/B, CBD Belapur, Navi Mumbai 400 614

Jallandhari, Hafeez (1900-1982) Urdu poet; his master piece is *Shahnama Islam*, which describes the glory of Islam; Pakistan government conferred on him its medal of recognition "Khan Bahadur".

Kohli, Suresh (b.1947) Poet, literary critic and documentary film-maker. Has published four collections of poetry, one novel and edited several volumes of essays and short stories. Has translated extensively from Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi. Edited and published *The Indian Literary Review* from 1979 to 1990. Add: E-180, Greater Kailash Part II, New Delhi 110 048.

Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) One of the greatest of Malayalam poets who, beginning with the publication of *Veena Poovu*, a poem of 41 stanzas, inaugurated a new era in modern Malayalam poetry; he wrote khanda kavyas like *Leela, Nalini, Duravastha, Chandala Bhikshuki* and others earning the title 'Mahakavi', although he never wrote a

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Mahakavya; his last major work was a narrative poem *Karuna*; his most important transcreation in verse is *Buddhacharitam*, following the *Light of Asia* by Edwin Arnold; he also translated Swami Vivekanand's *Rajayoga* into Malayalam; was the disciple of Sree Narayana Guru and, along with him, played an important role in the social reform of Kerala in the early part of the 20th century; he was a pioneering industrialist too.

Maiti, Satiprasad. Head, Department of English, Ramakrishna Mission Residential College, Narendrapur, Kolkata 700 103.

Mandal, Somdatta. Translates from Bengali into English. Add: FD-462/4 Salt Lake, Sector III, Kolkata 700 106

Motwani, Rani J. Add: Translates from Urdu into English. Add: 12A, Anand Vihar, St. Martin's Road, Bandra (W), Mumbai 400 050

Mukhopadhyay, Shirshendu (b. 1935-) is a famous fiction writer in Bengali; has written for children as well; his works include *Ghunpoka, Parthibo, Maanabjamin, Paarapaar, Manojader adbhut Baari, Lal Nil Manush, Churi*; renowned also for writing thrillers like *Shada Beral*; recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Vidyasagar Award, Ananda Purashkar, Bhualka Puraskar, etc. Add: Lalkella, 74D, Rahim Ostagar Road, Calcutta 700 045 or 538 Jodhpur Park, Ground Floor, Kolkata 700 068.

Nayar, Rana. Well-known translator from Punjabi into English; Professor of English, Punjab Univeresity, Chandigarh. Add: E-70, Sector 14, Chandigarh 160 014.

Panwar, Purabi (b.1946) Academic, critic and translator. Teaching at the College of Vocational Studies, University of Delhi. Add: 113 Shahpur Jat, New Delhi – 110 049.

Pradhan, Anuja Mohan. Translates from Kui into English. Add: Section Officer (Finance & Accounts), National Metallurgical Laboratory, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand 831 007

Pradhan, Tapan Kumar. Translates from Oriya into English. Add: Member of Faculty, Reserve Bank of India, Zonal Training Centre, Sector 7, CBD Belapur, Navi Mumbai 400 614

Pattukkottai, Prabhakar. Writes stories in Tamil. Add: Athma House, 37/1, Canal Bank Road, Kasturba Nagar, Adyar, Chennai 600 020

Rajkumar, B.S. (b.1958) Manipuri poet, critic and translator with more than five books to his credit. Add: Maibam Chingmang, Nambol, Manipur 795 134.

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Rao, Damodar K. Translates from Telugu into English; associated with Department of English, Kakatiya Unviersity, Warangal. Add: B-308, Saiprakash Apartments, 1-8-447, Balasamudram, Hanamkonda 506 001.

Rao, Shweta. Research scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, I.I.T., Roorkee, Uttarakhand 247 667.

Rizio Yohannan Raj: Writes fiction in Malayalam and poetry in English and translates from Malayalam to English; has two novels *Avinasam* and *Yaatrikam*; her poems have been published in reputed journals; a member of the Poetry Circle, Mumbai. Add: D II, B-34, Motibagh, New Delhi 110 021.

Sah, Abha. Translates from Hindi into English. Add: D-7, III Floor, Atur Park, Chembur, Mumbai 400 171.

Salil, Kuldip (b. 1938) Writes in Urdu and translates from Urdu into English; has four collections of poetry *Bees Sal Ka Safar, Jo Keh Na Sake* (ghazals) etc. and *Angrezi Ki Shreshth Kavi aur Unki Shreshth Rachnayen*, an anthology of best-known English poems in Hindi, besides several poems; retired as Reader in English from Hans Raj College, Delhi Unvieristy; recipient of Delhi Hindi Academy Award. Add: 1770 Outram Line, S.G.T.B. Nagar, Delhi 110 009.

Satpathy, Sumanyu (b.1952) Critic in English; has published one book on criticism, *Re-viewing Reviewing* and several research articles and essays in Indian and international journals; serving as Professor of English in Delhi University. Add: No.8171, D-8, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110 070.

Shah, Nila. Working in Shri Jasani Arts & Commerce College, Rajkot. Add: Shyam, 3/45, Jankalayan Society, Rajkot 360 001.

Shastry, S. Ravikiran (b.1955) Hindi short-story writer; active in the field of theatre, film and television for the last 30 years; his stories have been translated in English and Telugu also. Add: 103, Nityanand, Seven Bungalows, Andheri (West), Bombay 400 053.

Singh, E. Nilakanta. (b.1927) Renowned Manipuri poet, essayist and literary critic. Also in English. His most famous poetic works include *Chatlasine Kadaidano Ibani* (1971) and *Tirthayatra* (1985); recipient of many awards, most notably the Sahitya Akademi Award (1987), the Sahitya Vachaspati Award (1985) and the Sahityaratna Award (1988). A retired Professor of philosophy, Nilakanta Singh continues to write actively. Address: Keisamthong Elangbam Leikai, Imphal 795001, Manipur 220979.

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Srivastava, A.K. Head, Division of Plant Physiology & Biochemistry, Indian Institute of Sugarcane Research, Lucknow. Add: C-59, Sector –G, LDA Colony, Kanpur Road, Lucknow 226 012

Stinus, Sara Mathai (1929-2006) Born in North Karnataka where her father, who was with National Missionary Society, migrated; Sara was a lecturer in history and politics at Wilson College, Mumbai, before she settled down in Denmark; published a number of poems, stories and essays in Danish newspapers and contributed to several anthologies of poetry; has several books of poems and prose in Danish, the latest being a collection of Indian tales, *Under Barndommens Himmel;* Sara's husband, Erik Stinus, is also a poet and writer; he has translated the works of R.K.Narayanan, Premchand and Khuswant Singh into Danish. Address of her legal heir: Mr. Erik Stinus, Upsalagade 6 st.tv., DK-2100 Copenhagen 0, Denmark.

Sumathy, U. Writes literary criticism in English; Lecturer in English at Government Arts College, Coimbatore.

Thakur, Murari Madhusudan. (b. 1932) Indian English writer, also translates from Hindi to English; *Thus Spake Bhishma*, a novel was published in 1992; has been awarded the Durgawati Memorial Award from Patna University. Address: The Ashram Singwara, Singhwara – 847106, Darbhanga District, Bihar.

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Note

The lists of various prizes announced in connection with the Sahitya Akademi *Indian Literature* Golden Jubilee (1957-2007) Literary Translation Competition in *Indian Literature* 241, stand revised as follows:

Poetry

Rana Nayar (First)
Tapan Kumar Pradhan (Second)
Paromita Das (Third)

Consolation

B.S. Rajkumar
Kuldip Salil
Anupam Bhattacharjee
K. Damodar Rao
Syed Kabeer Ahmad

Winner of one-year free subscription added to the list

Tirthankar Das Purkayastha

Editor

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Indian Literature Golden Jubilee Literary Translation Prize Winners

Winners of One Year Free Subsription

Poetry

R. Ganapathy
Vandana Datta
V. B. Lal
Rabindranath Bhattacharyya
Hemant Gahlot
Nabila Jamshed
Gayatri Pagdi
Sudipta Chatterjee
Subarna Chakraborti
Vijayabhaskararamarao V
Hirendra Nath Dutta
Durga Prasad Panda
Upendra Rawat
Sanjay Tewary
Bashi Kant Choudhary
Mahmudul Hasani
Ataur Rahman Tariq
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